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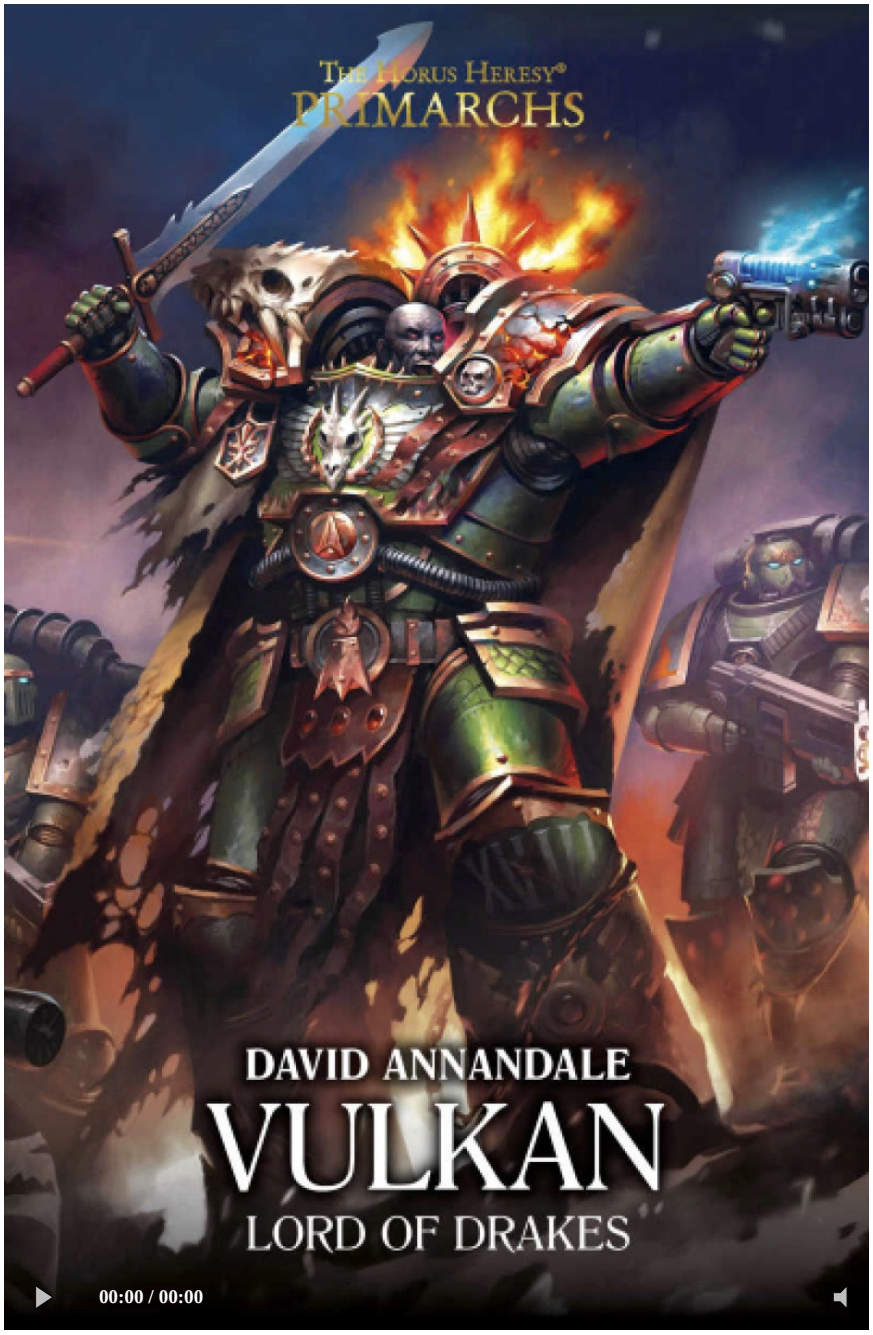
THE HORUS HERESY®
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LORD OF DRAKES
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JAGHATAI KHAN: WARHAWK OF CHOGORIS

FERRUS MANUS: GORGON OF MEDUSA

FULGRIM: THE PALATINE PHOENIX

LORGAR: BEARER OF THE WORD

PERTURABO: THE HAMMER OF OLYMPIA

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LEMAN RUSS: THE GREAT WOLF

ROBOUTE GUILLIMAN: LORD OF ULTRAMAR

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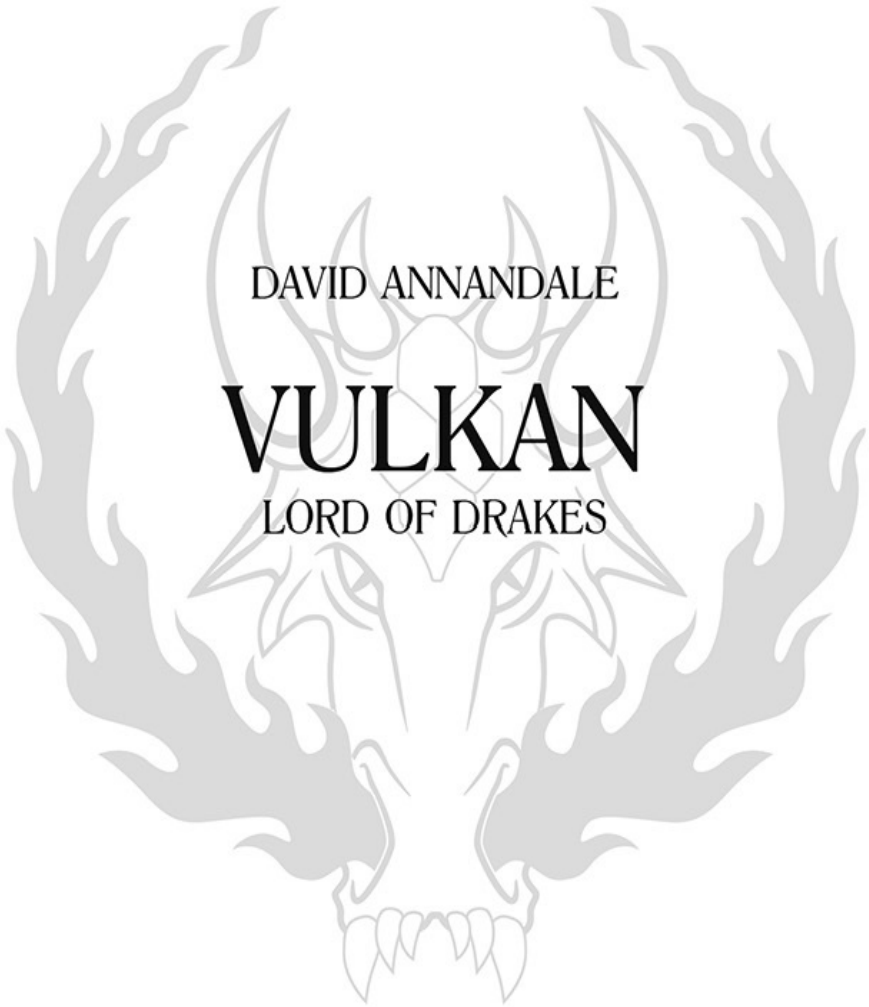

DAVID ANNANDALE

VULKAN

LORD OF DRAKES

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

Mighty heroes battle for the right to rule the galaxy. The vast armies of the Emperor of Mankind conquer the stars in a Great Crusade – the myriad alien races are to be smashed by his elite warriors and wiped from the face of history.

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The seeds of heresy have already been sown, and the start of the greatest war in the history of mankind is but a few years away...

ONE

FORGE / RETREAT / SWARM

War cannot be waged in isolation. Every battle has consequences. Every battle has victims beyond the combatants.

Consequences are responsibilities. This is a fact of life on Nocturne. It is one that this Legion must never forget. It is not enough merely to know when to strike and when to hold ground. We of Nocturne know well what it means never to give way. The ground that we hold might as well be in our blood, for to yield it is to condemn those we would defend.

But when to strike? This is a more fraught question. To strike when the enemy is most vulnerable may also mean causing the most harm to the innocent. What is the purpose of any battle? Victory alone is insufficient. What are the consequences of that victory? More fully, what are the responsibilities of that victory? It may be more honourable – indeed it may be morally necessary – to strike not when the enemy is weakest but when the greatest number of innocents may be protected, even if that means taking further losses as warriors.

Knowing when that moment comes requires judgement as fine as observation. Once the moment is there, then resolution is called upon, and that is something this Legion has never lacked.

– Vulkan, *Meditations*

The air rippled with heat. Flames jetted from the exhaust pipes of immense forges. Tremors shook the walls of the cavern. The space was vast, but the work it contained was bigger yet. The underbelly of the machine’s hull

extended along the entire length of the cavern. Fore and aft passed through openings that had been blasted through the rock, reaching into other caves just as huge, just as hot, where the echoes of the great labour were just as loud. The upper portions of the machine occupied other regions of the honeycomb of caverns beneath the surface of Nocturne. It was surrounded by a cluster of forges, each one worthy of legend, all of them labouring without cease.

Igniax Nomus Rhy'tan walked down the cavern, running his hand against the side of the machine's hull. The shielding was the thickest he had ever seen on anything that was not a void ship. It was rich in monumental engravings. They celebrated the XVIII Legion and the history of the device. They were also representations of the forges that were bringing renewal to the huge body.

The old and the new, Rhy'tan thought, and wished the words did not trouble him.

A dozen metres away, Forgemaster T'kell had stepped away from a gantry crane and was looking up at the hull with the evaluating, proprietary eye of the true artisan. T'kell's features looked as if they had been carved from a massive ingot of the same adamantine alloy as the hull. He had been tempered on the anvil of Nocturne long and hard before he had undergone the most honourable reforging of them all, the one that had made him a legionary of the XVIII and a true son of Vulkan.

'This is fine work, Master T'kell,' Rhy'tan said as he drew near. 'A construction of rare strength.'

'As it should be,' T'kell muttered, speaking more to himself than to Rhy'tan. Then he turned his head to look at the Igniax. 'My thanks, brother.' He smiled, as if grudgingly allowing himself a flicker of pride. Then the smile faded, replaced by a frown. 'I do still wonder about the weapon's purpose. It has no conceivable use on Nocturne.'

'Why would you have imagined it would?'

T'kell shook his head. 'A momentary foolishness,' he said. 'I forget sometimes that we will, and must, leave.'

'Our destiny lies in the Emperor's Great Crusade.'

'It does, it does. I know this. But, Nomus, when will we leave? Where will we go? And what will we use this for?'

'When it is time, where we are needed and in the proper campaign.' Rhy'tan spoke with more confidence than he felt.

T'kell looked around the booming cavern. 'And so we will leave Nocturne,' he said softly.

'Leave, but not abandon.'

'I do understand that. I do.'

'But…?'

‘But do you really understand your purpose? Do you? I do not. Any more than I understand our work here.’ He slapped a palm against the hull. ‘I know what this can do. But I do not know its true purpose.’

Rhy’tan took a breath, searching for an answer he already knew was out of his reach. In the same instant, he felt a new rhythm in the vibrations shaking the floor. Steady, firm, powerful. He knew what it was even before he saw the look of chagrin in T’kell’s eyes.

I have failed, Rhy’tan thought. *I have let my own uncertainty defeat me*. His face burning with shame, he turned and bowed his head as the primarch strode towards them.

Vulkan wore the simple, hardened leathers of a smith. He had been labouring at the side of his sons, for the work being done on the machine was as much a produce of his hands as it was the design of his genius. Simple though his attire was, he walked in majesty. Its aura, invisible yet blinding, shone like the glow of a furnace. T’kell’s features were hard, but Vulkan’s were carved of something stronger than stone, invulnerable to erosion yet tempered by wisdom. Vulkan’s face was that of a veteran warrior, one who knew war and could not be broken by it. But it was also the face of one who knew the cost of war, who would never turn away from that cost and who would seek to be the shield against which the waves of conflict would shatter.

‘I’m sorry, lord,’ said T’kell.

‘For what?’ Vulkan asked. ‘For having perfectly understandable questions? For wondering what we are about and when we will be about it? We have always been honest with each other, since before we were a Legion. Will we stop now?’

‘No,’ T’kell said.

‘No,’ Vulkan repeated. ‘If you have questions, you must ask them. If I have answers, I must give them to you. If I don’t, I must tell you that too, and the simple fact is that I do not. Not yet. When we shall depart and where our duty will take us, I do not know. But I do know this – the Emperor has a task for us. Our role will be one for which we are eminently suited. As for this,’ he touched the side of the hull with a craftsman’s care, ‘it is a storied vehicle. It took part in one of the proudest moments of the Eighteenth Legion on Terra, long before my father found me again. The machine’s history is legend. And I believe its legend is unfinished. That is why I had it brought here from where it rested on Mars.’

Rhy’tan said, ‘When it sees action again, I have no doubt its legend will grow. Things could hardly be otherwise.’

Vulkan smiled at T’kell. ‘You do not have the answers you seek, but do the ones I have given suffice?’

‘They do, lord,’ T’kell said.

‘Then I will interrupt your work no further,’ said Vulkan. He looked at Rhy’tan. ‘Nomus, will you come with me?’

As Rhy’tan followed his primarch out of the forge chamber, he felt his hearts clench with renewed shame. Vulkan’s words with T’kell had not comforted him. His uncertainty was as strong as ever. And another thought had begun to trouble him. There was a possibility that would explain the new Legion being held back from joining the old one. He did not want to articulate it, especially not to Vulkan. Yet he could not put it from his mind.

The stone gallery ran along the northern end of the highest cavern in the complex. This region was more of a staging ground than a forge. In the centre of the gallery, Vulkan and Rhy’tan looked down upon the expanse of the rockcrete floor. Row upon row of tanks stood waiting to rumble up the ramp that passed beneath the gallery and led to the space port on the surface. Legionaries and Mechanicum tech-priests inspected individual vehicles, teams verifying and adjusting the weapons in preparation for an off-world assault that still hovered in the indefinite future.

The great forces of Vulkan’s Nocturnean Legion were ready for deployment. They had been for some time. The years spent training the legionaries were done. The warriors were ready, and their weapons were forged. Their transport and assault vehicles waited to be launched. The work on the huge machine in the caverns below was the last important task unfinished. When he saw it completed, he would at last lead his sons into battle in the Emperor’s name. In the time he had been absent from Nocturne, fighting and learning at the Emperor’s side, he had led contingents seconded from other Legions. He had been honoured to do so, and he had found true kinship with the Iron Hands of Ferrus Manus. But all of that had been mere prologue. These were his sons, shaped by the fires of Nocturne, and it was at their head that he belonged.

The legionaries of the XVIII would march as soon as he gave the order.

Only he had no order to give.

‘Does it trouble you,’ he asked Rhy’tan, ‘that I could not tell Forgemaster T’kell when we would depart Nocturne?’

The Igniax was silent for a short while, thinking through his answer. ‘No,’ he said slowly, ‘that does not trouble me.’

‘But something does.’

Rhy’tan was quiet again. Vulkan waited, patient. Rhy’tan always spoke carefully. Vulkan had never heard an outburst from him. That was one of the reasons he valued Rhy’tan. As Igniax, Rhy’tan taught the wisdom of

Nocturne's myths and traditions. The deep, vertical furrows of his cheeks were the marks of many years of experience, earned long before he had become a legionary. He did not act without careful thought. His deliberation also made him a sounding board. Vulkan trusted Rhy'tan to listen, to take to heart the new lessons Vulkan sought to impart and then to convey the lessons to others. Just as importantly, he knew he could trust Rhy'tan to speak with him honestly.

'Are you troubled, lord?' Rhy'tan asked.

'What do you mean?'

'Are you troubled by not knowing when our march will begin? Do you not wonder why the Emperor has not told you where and how we are to rejoin the rest of the Eighteenth?'

Yes, Vulkan thought. *It has troubled me since I first asked Him when that time would come, and He responded by keeping me near Him and away from my sons*. He did not say all this to Rhy'tan. He said, 'Yes.' That was enough to begin with.

'Do you know how it will become apparent that our time has come?'

'I do not. But I have faith that I *will* know. Does this disturb you?'

Vulkan waited once more. Rhy'tan was staring, unseeing, at the floor beneath the gallery. Vulkan watched the Igniax wrestle with himself. It was clear that he would have preferred to keep these particular thoughts locked away, but Vulkan had asked him, and he would have to respond.

The silence stretched on. Vulkan murmured, 'Remember that we must be honest between ourselves.'

Rhy'tan nodded. 'I am disturbed by a theory that would explain why we are still not called to join our brothers.'

Vulkan caught Rhy'tan's very slight hesitation before he used the words 'our brothers'.

'Go on,' he said.

Rhy'tan sighed. 'I have been wondering if the reason we have not joined our brothers yet is because we are not meant to.'

Vulkan consciously held his fists open and relaxed his fingers. Rhy'tan had hit close to the mark in a number of ways. 'Go on,' he said, though he could guess what Rhy'tan was about to say.

'How does the rest of the Eighteenth fare at present?' Rhy'tan asked.

'I do not know.'

'The reputation of our brothers…' Rhy'tan hesitated again. 'It is a point of concern,' he finished, clearly dismayed with his own euphemism.

Vulkan grimaced. In the years of his service to the Emperor, when he had left Nocturne and fought by his father's side, his face hidden by his helm, he

had heard the muttered judgements about the XVIII. No one questioned the Legion's valour. No one sought to diminish its victories. But it had thrown itself into so many desperate stands that self-sacrifice had begun, in the eyes of some, to look suicidal.

Vulkan had not ignored the whispers. He had studied the records of the XVIII's engagements. All of them. He saw the strength and the bravery of the Legion, and its commitment to shield the innocent. He also saw the tally of losses, a tally that seemed to be growing exponentially over time. He had spoken to Rhy'tan of this. The Igniax needed to understand the vision Vulkan had for the Legion. If Rhy'tan was to help spread this vision, it could not be a matter simply of repeating Vulkan's words. He had to see what the primarch saw.

And they had to speak honestly.

'There are thoughts and words that oppress you,' Vulkan said, 'because you are reluctant to express them. You must speak them. And I must hear them.'

Rhy'tan took a breath, then said, 'Perhaps we of Nocturne are fated to be the totality of the Eighteenth Legion.'

'I know, by the hesitation in your voice, that arrogance has not brought you to this conclusion.' *Hear him out*, Vulkan thought. *This cannot and must not be true, but hear him out.* This idea had come to him too, and it had never been welcome.

'I hope it has not, lord,' Rhy'tan said. 'You were taken from Terra and destiny brought you to Nocturne. Your Legion, created without you, dwindles as if its warriors sense, somewhere in their being, its… its incompleteness. Perhaps the old Legion must vanish. Perhaps this is what the Emperor awaits.'

'Is this what you believe?' Vulkan asked.

'I do not know,' Rhy'tan confessed. 'It is a thought that grows and refuses to be dismissed.'

'Have you shared this thought with others?'

'I have not broached it, but they have with me.'

Vulkan nodded. 'I see.' *The task you have given me is a heavy one, Father.* 'I'm glad you have told me of this, Nomus,' he said. 'I will tell you now that we will put the lie to this belief. The legionaries of Terra are my sons as much as the legionaries of Nocturne. They are your kin. There *is* a reason why we are as yet separated from them. But it is not to wait out their extinction.'

Rhy'tan bowed his head. 'I am glad of it, lord,' he said.

But do you believe it? Vulkan wondered if Rhy'tan was convinced.

He also wondered when the sign from the Emperor would come. He knew it was time for this half of the Legion to play its part in the Crusade. What

troubled him was that he did not know what time had come for the other half.

The bombardment blasted down the mountain pass towards the space port of Sybota. The barrage was undisciplined, the ordnance was primitive, and it was devastating. There was no skill in the ork attack, but there was overwhelming abundance. It was as if the sky had turned to stone and then collapsed, falling to earth in a hammering avalanche. The air screamed with the unending whistles of the shells. The ground erupted and erupted and erupted, craters overlapping each other, and the pass was choked with flame and dust.

'*Total loss of visibility, lord commander,*' Artellus Numeon voxed from his Typhon siege tank, *Victor of the Caucasus*.

Encased in his battle-scarred Terminator armour, riding in the top hatch of the Fellblade *Ethnarch's Doom*, Cassian Vaughn wiped the dust from his helm's lenses. 'I am well aware of that, first captain.' Before him was nothing but tumultuous darkness lit by blinding flashes of dirty orange fire.

'*We cannot see the targets to shoot them.*'

Despite Numeon's frustration, the Typhon's Dreadhammer cannon boomed, the sound reaching Vaughn through the air and over the vox. The flare of the muzzle seared the darkness of the pass, revealing the tank's position, a hundred metres to *Doom*'s right. The enormous shell streaked into the tempest of blasts. Moments later, the deep rumble of an entire cliff face collapsing rolled back to Cassian.

'We know where they were, and where they must be,' Vaughn said. The range of the ork guns was poor. The artillery barrage was effective only because there were hundreds of the cannons further up the pass and on the lower peaks.

'*The long-range auspex readings show a uniform heat bloom,*' Numeon reported.

'Then we'll manage with that.' Vaughn switched vox-channels, broadcasting to the entire force in the pass. 'All units, maintain fire. Their storm will not move us. They advance no further.'

Fool, he thought. *How many times have you said the same thing this past year? How many lines were we going to hold? How many times have we been driven back?*

Once was too often, an insult to the reputation of the XVIII Legion, and the orks had repeated the insult again and again since they had come to the Taras Division. A million of the greenskins, descending upon human systems in a collection of vessels that could not be dignified by the term *fleet*. They were a swarm, a pestilential wave of hundreds of wrecks, hulks and crude

assemblages barely recognisable as ships surrounding a single, central mass the size of a planetoid. In a year of war, Vaughn had not yet been able to determine precisely how large the enemy's force was. There were more than a million orks, that much the XVIII had been able to estimate. Their numbers might as well have been infinite. A million against the nineteen thousand of the XVIII Legion.

And that was at the start of the war. Vaughn's legionaries had slowed the ork advance, but they could not stop it. The filthy waves upon waves of greenskin ships and ground troops robbed honour, duty, determination, bravery and self-sacrifice of meaning. All Vaughn had to show for a year of struggle was a diminished Legion and a string of burning, abandoned planets.

Corcyra would soon add its name to the tally of lost worlds in the Anteros System. The XVIII was holding the ground in the pass, but it would not be long before there was no more ground to hold.

Vaughn had deployed the full strength of the XVIII's heavy armour. The choke point was also the primary approach to Sybota's east. The north and south were shielded by the embrace of the mountain chain, and to the west lay the ocean that surrounded Corcyra's single inhabited land mass. The XVIII had used Sybota's geographic isolation against the greenskin hordes. The Legion had bought time. Now the time was almost gone. The pressure of the invasion was becoming irresistible. Vaughn might as well be trying to hold back tectonic plates.

'*They're coming closer*,' said Numeon.

'Then they'll be harder to miss,' Vaughn said. But he thought, *They will not stop.*

The full fury of the bombardment fell on the Legion's tanks, then beyond. There was no consistency to the power of the greenskin ordnance. Some of the shells failed to explode at all. The ablative armour of the tanks shrugged off many others, their force too weak to cut through the powerful Imperial war machines. But there were just as many that were dangerous, huge masses of densely packed high explosive. They should have blown up inside the cannons that fired them, but instead they arced down to shatter the earth and unleash their fury on the XVIII.

A sudden cluster of massive ordnance struck the tank ahead of *Ethnarch's Doom*. The Typhon *Bane of the Tempest Galleries* weathered the first few impacts, but they kept coming, a hammering of mad destruction, and at last the anvil cracked. *Bane*'s hull split open, then its ammunition erupted. The Typhon vanished. The fireball expanded through the storm, washing over nearby tanks. Vaughn squinted as the flames reached him, even though his auto-lenses adjusted to the sudden flare. A twisted, glowing chunk of *Bane*'s

hull cartwheeled past him, one corner clanging against the turret of the Fellblade. Vaughn whirled in the hatch and looked back. The trailing flames and the flying rubble stretched ragged fingers in the direction of Sybota's space port. The bombardment storm hid the skyline of the city from view. Vaughn could see nothing but boiling grey and the burn. But then he heard another thunder, a welcome one, continuous and growing. He saw a glow, the light of a pillar of fire so huge it could shine through the storm. It rose, slowly at first, then faster, climbing higher and higher.

It was the sign of the closest thing to victory the XVIII could still hope to achieve on Corcyra.

'Orasus,' Vaughn called over a channel to the space port. 'What is our status?'

'*The last of the heavy lifters has departed, lord commander,*' Tactical Legionary Maraeus Orasus answered. He was the vox-operator for his squad, one of those detached to oversee the exodus from Corcyra.

'Have any further refugees reached the space port?'

'*None.*'

Then the evacuation was complete. The human population of Corcyra was in orbit and beyond, fleeing the system while the XVIII held the attention of the orks.

'All units,' said Vaughn, 'our mission is complete.' *Only this should never have been our mission. We are forced to consider total retreat a victory.* 'Pull back to the space port.'

'*Lord commander,*' said Orasus, '*shells have begun to fall on the city.*'

Vaughn bit back a curse. 'From what direction?'

'*From everywhere but the east. They are encircling Sybota.*'

We barely slowed them, Vaughn thought. There were so many greenskins, they were pouring over the mountain peaks like a wind-borne plague. '*All possible speed to the space port,*' he ordered the Legion. '*Cannons, keep firing on the advance of the foe. We have only a short time to depart. Our duty on Corcyra is complete, but our war is not.*'

It never will be, he thought. *Not until the last of us lies dead.* He no longer imagined an end to the struggle that saw the orks destroyed. Every strategy he used now would do nothing more than gain the XVIII a bit of time.

Ethnarch's Doom's engine rumbled into a higher pitch as Legionary Blasius turned the Fellblade around. Vaughn's perspective did not change as, inside the tank, gunner Caelius swung the turret through one hundred and eighty degrees. Caelius fired the Fellblade's twin-linked accelerator cannons. From one barrel came a high-explosive shell designed to turn infantry into bloody mist. From the other came an armour-piercing projectile that could smash the

strongest walls. The double punch of the *Doom*'s accelerators could lay an army to waste. Caelius kept sending out its wrath, cutting through the bombardment to unseen targets.

'*They're dying out there,*' Caelius shouted into the vox. The tumult of the barrage was so constant, so omnipresent, that there was no other way to communicate, even for crews in a single tank. '*We punish them for every step they take.*'

'That we do, legionary,' Vaughn answered. *Not enough of them die. Not nearly enough. But we can punish them all the same.*

The ranks of heavy armour retreated from the pass. The bombardment followed. There was no respite from the pounding explosions. The craters slowed the formation down as the tanks crawled in and out of them. Now and then, Vaughn made out the flash of ork guns, sometimes from elevated positions, sometimes advancing through the pass. The enemy was closer yet. He could almost imagine he heard the snarl of the infantry. Perhaps he was not imagining it at all. The greenskins would not hesitate to rush through their own bombardment in their eagerness to engage with their foe.

It took Vaughn several attempts to pierce the static and reach Shipmaster Vathea Resalt aboard the battleship *Klostzatz*. 'We are done here, shipmaster,' he said when he got through.

'*So I surmised, lord commander. The captain of that lifter is boasting about being the last to leave Corcyra*.'

How very brave of him, Vaughn thought. But in the next instant, he felt a surge of relief. Bravado was a good sign. That meant the ship of civilians had cleared the atmosphere and was out of immediate danger. His delaying action against the orks had succeeded.

All that remained now was for the Legion to escape extinction.

And then fight again.

'*I have sent all transports to Sybota, lord commander,*' Resalt said.

'Thank you, shipmaster. It is time for us to leave.'

Sybota was on fire as the XVIII Legion reached the space port. What little discipline the orks had demonstrated with their bombardment of the mountain pass had vanished, and their guns were now firing indiscriminately, every tower of the city an inviting target. The hordes closing in from north and south had broken through the walls. The entire city was within range of the artillery, and the greenskins' infantry were rampaging through the streets. In the wide ferrocrete expanse of the space port's launching pads, the wind quickly blew away the smoke and dust of the shell impacts, and Vaughn looked up into a sky reddened by the conflagrations and the bloody streaks of

falling shells. From a way off came a roar like the pounding of surf, its note of savagery becoming clearer as the tide approached. A hundred thousand guttural cries made that roar.

‘This is a poor spectacle of victory,’ Vaughn admitted to Numeon. Now that there was no more action to take on Corcyra, Vaughn felt free to express his frustrations privately with his friend.

They stood on the vast rockcrete apron of the space port, before the regiments of legionaries awaiting evacuation. The shadow of the abandoned control tower fell over them. Smoke drifted upwards from shell holes in the walls, shrouding the tower. The air over the apron was sharp with expended fuel. Heavy lifters had already taken most of the tanks off-planet. Squadrons of Stormbirds were transporting the Legiones Astartes to the fleet waiting at low anchor.

‘It is an empty spectacle,’ said Numeon. ‘The greenskins are wasting their energy. There is nothing left here for them to kill. We did kill many.’

‘We always kill many. We will kill many more. And they will keep coming. They will not stop at the Taras Division.’

There was an eruption of fire a few kilometres from the outskirts of the space port. Stormbirds were making strafing runs over the approaching orks.

‘Not much time,’ said Numeon.

Vaughn eyed the remaining ranks of legionaries. ‘Time enough.’ Even as the flight of gunships departed, he could see another angling in from the north-west. This would be the last. ‘We are done here,’ he said. ‘Now we depart to fight and hold them. Again.’

‘As we did for Sybota.’

‘You still have a taste for irony, Artellus. Well done.’

Numeon grunted. ‘We’re always holding them back, aren’t we? We cannot advance. Whether we like it or not, we are losing ground.’

‘We are.’

‘And when they move to the Taras System?’

Vaughn shook his head. There could not be another evacuation. The populations of the Taras worlds were too large. There was no way for any fleet to get so many billions away, and there was nowhere for them to go.

There were sudden flashes high in the sky. Small, distant, but bright: the flares of combat in the void.

‘*Lord commander,*’ Resalt voxed, ‘*there’s a ship incoming to your position.*’

‘They’re attempting a landing?’ Vaughn asked in disbelief.

‘*Not a landing,*’ said Resalt. ‘*We’ve crippled them. They’re turning their ship into an orbital bomb.*’

The squadron of Stormbirds and Thunderhawks, the last that would be

needed, was almost there.

‘End strafing runs,’ Vaughn ordered. ‘All aircraft not involved in transport, make for orbit.’

One of the flares in the sky grew brighter.

The gunships came in, their ramps slamming down even before they had fully landed.

‘On board now!’ Vaughn cried, and the legionaries stormed up the ramps. Vaughn waited until the end, heading for the Stormbird *Stoic* with Numeon. He looked up as he boarded. The bright flare was a constant, becoming blinding, becoming flame, becoming a solid object.

‘Go!’ Vaughn was shouting, barely conscious that he was doing so.

The order was unnecessary. The gunships were taking off. The space port shook with the roar of a dozen gunship engines screaming for speed and height.

‘*Go!*’ Vaughn shouted again, as if his command could urge the aircraft to greater velocity.

The deck heaved under his feet as *Stoic* thundered upwards. He snatched at the grav-web and pulled himself against the bulkhead, strapping himself in. ‘Wide dispersal,’ he ordered. ‘Pull away from the space port. Get out of the target zone.’

The fire in the sky drew closer still. *Stoic* raced on a diagonal path away from the coming apocalypse. Its engines shrieked with strain. The fireball filled Vaughn’s vision, a misshapen, monstrous, grotesquery of a ship. It should never have flown, it should never have been voidworthy, and now it was conceding to the impossibility of its design and was coming to earth, trailing fire, hungry for its final immolation.

It glowed with the heat of re-entry.

Stoic streaked away and the ship dropped past it. The hulk clipped the Thunderhawks *Resilience* and *Unbroken* and the Stormbird *Flamebringer*, shearing off wings and tails. The gunships tumbled, out of control, gravity pulling them back to follow the ork monster to its doom.

The hulk smashed into the space port. The fireball engulfed entire square kilometres of the city. Towers vanished beneath the huge sea of flame. The shock wave chased *Stoic*, then overtook it. A monstrous fist shook the gunship. The hull groaned. The craft struggled to maintain its momentum, and for several seconds its speed bled away. But it survived the blow and kept climbing through an atmosphere wracked by turbulent fire.

Vaughn gazed down through the viewing block at the destruction below. The stricken gunships had vanished in the holocaust. More men gone, his Legion diminished again, and for what?

‘This is what we have died for,’ he said to Numeon.

The fireball was dimming from incandescence to an angry red. The shattered spires of Sybota stuck out of the flames like the splinters of a huge beast’s skeleton.

‘We did save the population,’ Numeon said.

‘You know we didn’t. We only delayed their destruction.’

Numeon said nothing for a moment. ‘You truly believe we cannot win?’

It was Vaughn’s turn to pause. The answer to Numeon’s question was obvious, but to speak it would be too shameful. ‘We can fight,’ he said, as if that were a sufficient answer. ‘We *will* fight.’

Outside the Stormbird, the air was growing dark as the gunship passed through the upper atmosphere. The battle in low orbit came into focus. The disciplined broadsides of the XVIII’s ships slashed through the poorly constructed ork vessels. Greenskin fire flashed fruitlessly back against flaring void shields.

‘We have a free hand now,’ Vaughn said, glimpsing hope. ‘There are no worlds to defend. We can throw everything into keeping the orks here, away from the Taras System.’

Vaughn held on to that hope as the gunships of the XVIII left Corcyra behind. They made for the *Klostzatz*. The battleship was surrounded by much smaller ork attackers. The greenskins’ ships did not have the firepower to pierce the Imperial vessel’s void shields, and they were trying to ram the *Klostzatz* instead. Shipmaster Resalt was holding them back with dense defensive firepower. Converging lance and cannon fire forward of the battleship had cleared enemy ships from the immediate region of the bow, opening the way for the returning gunships.

Numeon said, ‘What about their attack moon?’ The term designated the immense accretion of planetoids and ruined ships at the centre of the ork fleet. The construction was as monstrous as it was primitive. It looked like a frozen collision, a mad fusion of wrecks that should have destroyed each other but had instead cohered. It was grotesque, more gargoyle than vessel, a physical expression of the greenskins’ relentless savagery. ‘Can we keep it in the Anteros System if they decide to take it elsewhere?’ Numeon asked.

‘We have to change the orks’ minds,’ said Vaughn. ‘They must prefer to remain here, at war with a true enemy. We will be the irresistible challenge.’

The landing bays of the *Klostzatz* opened to receive the gunships. The Stormbirds made short work of the ork fighters that sought to interfere with their return to the battleship. One on one, the ork craft were helpless before the Imperium’s technology of war. They needed overwhelming numbers to tilt

the battle in their favour, and for now, Resalt had succeeded in carving out a space for her vessel.

By the time Vaughn had disembarked and made his way to the bridge, accompanied by Numeon, the attack moon was looming large in the primary oculus. The ork base had been in close orbit of Corcyra, its mere presence enough to change the world's tides. Resalt had moved what still remained of the XVIII's fleet away from it, to a position on the other side of Corcyra's moon. Now the monster was moving again, as if the orks had tired of the invasion as soon as their worthy foes had left. The rest of the ork ships moved with it, insects swarming around a leviathan. The strike cruiser *Khalkeus* was silhouetted against the attack moon as it manoeuvred back towards the battleship.

'Lord commander,' Resalt greeted him. Dark-skinned, her head clean-shaven, she had held command of the battleship for the length of the Great Crusade. Vaughn found it easier to imagine the bridge shorn of its oculus and its control surfaces than without its formidable shipmaster. 'As you can see, our position is becoming untenable.'

'And we have no need to hold it any longer, shipmaster. Take us out. Contact the *Khalkeus*. We draw the orks back to the worlds they have already burned. We'll have them chasing…'

He trailed off, staring at the oculus. Resalt followed his gaze. At the same moment, the bridge's vox crackled with the voice of Captain Gerhardt Vallorn aboard the *Khalkeus*.

A huge wave of ork vessels had whipped out around their base like the spiral arm of a galaxy. Now they rushed towards the strike cruiser, a storm of metal and xenos hate. The orks' guns were still no match for the *Khalkeus*, but its void shields were strained to the limit as hundreds of shells pounded against them. The vessel was surrounded by a violent aura. The enemy ships came on at ramming speed.

The first ones hit. They were smaller than the majestic Imperial vessel, but they broke through its overburdened void shields, slamming hard into the hull. The strike cruiser blazed with counter-fire, turning one ork ship after another into clouds of burning fuel and dissipating shrapnel. Still the orks came on with a suicidal singleness of purpose, as though they were the unthinking limb of the attack moon.

As the swarm closed around the *Khalkeus*, the outer edge of the arm reached towards the *Klostzatz*. Resalt directed covering fire towards the strike cruiser. More ork ships exploded, and the void was no longer black. It was a boiling, burning, convulsing tempest.

The ork base drew nearer. Even though the *Khalkeus* continued to make for

the *Klostzatz*, it seemed to grow smaller and smaller as the base expanded, becoming the only world in the oculus' universe of flame.

The frigate *Guardian of Flame* was the first to go. The largest of the ork hulks were almost its equal in size. Its hull withstood several collisions, and then a brutish fist of a shape, all reinforced prow and engine, cut it in half. The huge ram kept going, leaking atmosphere and flame. It was badly damaged, but still it hunted. It went straight on at the *Khalkeus* and struck at the same instant as two other, smaller ram ships. They broke through the void shields again just as the strike cruiser's defences were coming back online. The big ship punched through the *Khalkeus'* starboard flank and exploded, a torpedo half a kilometre long.

Amidships of the strike cruiser, flame blossomed. Cracks, shining white with heat, spread along the hull. The *Khalkeus* was still moving forwards, still heading for the *Klostzatz*, but its course had been knocked off true.

Vallorn's crew managed to restore vox communications, which had momentarily been consumed by static. '*We've lost steering,*' the captain said, his voice ragged with pain. '*Engines are not responding. Readings say they're going–*'

A savage dawn tore through the void and cut him off once more. The *Khalkeus* became its own pyre. The conflagration swallowed a score of ork ships, but hundreds more raced through the flames, charging like hungry carnivores towards their next prey. Behind them, the attack moon advanced. Its gravity pulled the destroyed greenskin and Imperial ships to its surface. Their wreckage punched craters on impact but did nothing more than scar the face of the xenos beast, rendering its image even more brutal.

'Take us out,' Vaughn ordered.

Another retreat. Again, there was no choice. Any reason to fight in the Anteros System had evaporated. The orks controlled it. The only hope now was to find a new, more favourable battlefield.

The *Klostzatz* hummed as its engines accelerated. The prow turned away from the attack moon and pointed towards the system's Mandeville point.

'Take us to Taras,' Vaughn said. 'Take us to Taras, and we'll burn them there.'

He turned away from the pulpit overlooking the bridge and stood over the tacticarium table. He did not have to stare at the shameful sight of the new retreat. He trusted Resalt to do as he had commanded. She knew the ship and its capabilities better than he did. If it was possible to escape from the orks, she would do so without his interference.

As the ork cannons and the fastest of their ships struck the *Klostzatz*'s void shields, and the hull began to quake, Vaughn stared at the star chart of the

Taras System. He would find the battlefield. He would strip the initiative from the orks. He would set the terms of the next battle.

TWO

ANTAEUM / FIREFALL / REVELATIONS

War is the forge of new alloys. It creates those who will withstand it.

– Vulkan, *Maxims*

The *Klostzatz* and its escorts transitioned into the Taras System. The battleship trailed smoke. Adamantine fragments, some as large as Land Raiders, tumbled from rents in the hull. In the strategium above the bridge, Vaughn flicked his eyes down the pict screen displaying constantly updating damage report data. Entire decks of the battleship were inaccessible. A score of legionaries had perished in the run to the Anteros Mandeville point. More than a thousand of the mortal crew had died. The remaining escorts had not fared much better. The XVIII's fleet was a shadow of the already diminished force that had arrived at the Taras Division a year ago. It was a shadow of - tatters and blood.

Our fate is written.

Vaughn pushed the thought away. Better to accept as a near-miracle the fact that the Geller field of every Legion vessel had held. There had been no further casualties in the warp.

We have accomplished that much, he told himself. *And we will do more.*

He turned his attention back to his Praetors and Resalt, who were gathered around the primary tacticarium table.

'The orks will follow us,' said Numeon.

'They would be coming to Taras regardless of our presence,' Vaughn said. 'The system lies on the path of their invasion. We are the defence, not the

lure. But if we are to stop them, if we are to protect the inhabited planets of Taras, and if we are not to abandon the refugees who arrived here thanks to us, then we must become a lure.'

'That should not be difficult,' said Numeon. 'They seem to enjoy our company.' There was no humour in his eyes. He ran a hand over his scalp, bare except for an aggressive ridge of hair that ran down the centre. The gesture was abrupt, frustrated, as if he were trying to contain his anger before the prospect of an unwinnable war. He was rough-edged next to Vaughn, who was a scion of a noble house in northern Afrik, and was taller and slimmer than most of his battle-brothers.

'We are in no better a position to fight them here than we were in Anteros,' said Resalt. 'The *Klostzatz* will go to war, lord commander, but please have no illusions about what she can do. Or what she can survive.'

'I have none,' Vaughn told her. 'We will fight them on the ground, where we can use the strength of our legionaries. Let them come to us here.' He pointed to Antaeum on the table's hololithic display. 'A death world,' he went on. 'No human population, and all the inhabited worlds lie sunward. The ground we will hold by making our stand on Antaeum is the rest of the system.'

'At least we will have a free hand against them there,' said Numeon. He paused, then gave Vaughn a sardonic look.

'Dare I ask whether there will be reinforcements?'

'There will be none. The astropathic choir has sent word, but all the other Legions are too far from Taras, their forces fully engaged in the Great Crusade. We are all there is.'

Vaughn looked around the table at his officers. No illusions, Resalt had said, and he saw none. All of them knew the scale of what would be coming for them, and they also knew what they could do against the greenskins.

When Vaughn ended the briefing a few minutes later, Numeon lingered in the strategium. Vaughn waited until Resalt had returned to the bridge pulpit to oversee the approach to Antaeum, then joined Numeon where he stood near the hololith of the planet. 'What is it?' Vaughn asked.

'I'm curious. Is Antaeum our last stand?'

There was a hint of a grin in Numeon's expression. Vaughn couldn't tell if the first captain's sense of irony was breaking out again, or if he meant the question seriously.

'How many last stands have we fought as a Legion?' Vaughn said. His evasion didn't fool either of them.

'This time feels different,' Numeon said.

The grin was still there.

Antaeum was far from the system's star. From this distance, Taras was little more than a bright pinprick. The light that reached the planet was weak and cold. Yet Antaeum burned. The planet heaved with tectonic activity. Its mottled red surface was split by incessant lava flows. Chains of volcanoes sent huge sulphur plumes over the landscape. The atmosphere was toxic, corrosive and thick with ash. Hurricane winds warred with each other.

'A fitting place,' Vaughn said as the Stormbird dropped lower.

Turbulence battered the gunship. For a second, it was in free fall. Then the engines caught the air again and the pilot, Carvanon, regained control of the descent.

'This world will try to kill us as much as it will the greenskins,' said Numeon.

'It can try,' said Vaughn.

Ash streaked the air dark grey. A red tinge spread outwards from the lava flows. In the distance was the hint of yellow from one of the sulphur eruptions.

'*We are approaching the coordinates you indicated, lord commander,*' Carvanon voxed.

'Good,' said Vaughn. He nodded, pleased, as the volcano came into view. 'A fitting place,' he said again. 'We will let the land fight for us. We will make it kill many greenskins.' He had studied the long-range auspex scans carefully before selecting the location of the stronghold. He knew what he planned was at the limits of what was possible, but the reality of the site looked far more formidable than inexpressive data suggested.

The volcano was an isolated cone rising from a flooded lava plain. The flows of the eruption had turned the plain once more into a glowing sea. Fresh lava slid over the old, glaring red covering the sullen dark. The slopes of the volcano were steep, but midway up the southern flank, the grade lessened for a few thousand metres.

Carvanon circled the region once, then pulled back to make way for the heavy lifters.

The mountain's crater was more built up on this side, protecting the flank. There were few lava flows running down the target area.

'Too steep for landing,' said Numeon.

'We won't have any yet,' Vaughn told him. 'We'll construct the landing pads and any other level surfaces we need on top of the modular fortifications once they're down.'

A massive wind gust hurled itself against the Stormbird. The gunship shuddered. Its port wing lifted as if the ship might roll onto its back, then dropped back down. At the other end of the plain, the centre volcano of a

chain erupted so violently, it blew up the top quarter of its peak. A monstrous pyroclastic surge roared across the flatlands.

Vaughn cursed. Antaeum was trying to kill them. There was no possibility of delaying construction. The action had begun, and they must complete it.

The gunships and lifters could not depart in time, so they continued with their tasks, as if a holocaust were not racing towards them.

'Defy this world!' Vaughn commanded. 'Show it that what we have claimed, we hold!'

The first of the prefabricated fortress units dropped from a heavy lifter and slammed into the slope of the mountain. The Stormbirds came in at angles and paused, engines blasting down to hold them in a brief hovering position. Legionaries leapt from the side doors and rushed to anchor the walls into the mountain face. Vaughn joined his troops. The surge was coming at hundreds of kilometres an hour, and Vaughn's lips pulled back in a grim smile as he triggered the adamantine harpoon at the corner of a wall section's base. The three-metre-wide cylinder thrummed, and an explosive charge shot the enormous harpoon into the mountainside with the force of a torpedo. It dug into rock before its head expanded, holding fast.

'This is our ground!' he voxed. 'We claim it, and we will hold it!'

A minute later, the surge was upon the Legion. The ash cloud blasted the ground as if it would scour it to the bedrock. Burning gas engulfed the landing site, and lava bombs fell on all sides. Ash struck Vaughn's Terminator armour like a hail of bullets, and threatened to clog his rebreather. The air was black and grey with fury, the whine of struggling engines fading behind the roar of the burning cloud.

The ships were shadows above Vaughn. They had no shape until they came within a hundred metres of his position. Engines screamed past, stuttered, roared again, and then there was fire everywhere. Flaming matter had scored a direct hit on a Thunderhawk's engines as it came in to drop more legionaries. For an instant the winds seized the gunship as the pilot struggled to right it, but its tail clipped the mountainside and it began to roll. Its nose hit too, sending the Thunderhawk tumbling away from the relative safety of the stronghold's site. Then a wing sank into a lava flow, momentum bled off and the gunship was down, molten rock sweeping over it, carrying it away and into oblivion.

The surge raged. It was as if the world had cracked open and the Legion had fallen into its core. Visibility dropped to nothing. Vaughn's auto-senses flashed red across all readings. The heat was overwhelming. His power pack's ability to vent it failed. Soon he would cook inside his own armour. There was nothing before him except the wall of the fortress he had decreed should be

here.

‘*I stand and I do not fall!*’ he shouted. ‘*I stand and I do not fall!*’ It was the only coherence he could manage as pain ripped through his body.

The vox was nothing but static and broken fragments of shouting. It seemed the wall before him should be melting. But it remained solid, and he held it. Touching it confirmed he was real. By placing his palms upon it, he claimed the fortress and the land as his own. He would not fall, he would not fail. Not here. There would be no further retreat.

There were more explosions, more ships going down. There was a deep, all-encompassing boom that Vaughn realised was one of the heavy lifters. But then the fire faded. Gradually, he could see again. Vaughn and the other legionaries on the slope were buried in ash up to their waists. He struggled free and looked around. The wreckage of a huge vessel lay at the foot of the mountain, flames leaping up from the crumpled hull. He counted the ships still in the air and was dismayed to find four more were missing. But there were also more warriors on the mountainside. They had survived dropping in the worst of the surge.

The walls of the fortress had held, Vaughn saw. The structure’s basic skeleton was in place. And as the ash fall diminished, more ships now arrived from the *Klostzatz*, dropping modules into position, while legionaries cemented their hold on Antaeum.

Later, when the dark day of the planet gave way to the thick blackness of night, the essentials of the fortress were in place, though the Legion would continue to strengthen it until the orks arrived. It had a name now, the Cauldron. The bulk of the legionaries were inside, sheltered. On the downslope threshold to the stronghold, Vaughn looked out at the land that had tried and failed to kill him, planning how he would put it to use.

‘A costly arrival,’ he said to Numeon, who stood beside him.

‘It is a victory, though. It feels real. We needed this one.’

‘This was our last retreat,’ Vaughn said. ‘The orks will not push us from Antaeum. We leave here victorious or not at all.’

The land in the shadow of Mount Deathfire groaned. The volcano stirred in uneasy slumber, and the plain cracked as if in the throes of a nightmare. Fissures opened up, deep wounds in the flesh of the earth. They glowed red with the molten blood of Nocturne. Clouds of sulphur spread across the plain. Gases ignited, and billows of fire rolled over Vulkan as he marched towards the obelisk.

The monolith of basalt reached fifteen metres into the air, but its roots went far deeper. Vulkan had carved it and brought it here himself, then plunged it

deep into the roots of Nocturne, where it would stand through all the upheavals of the Times of Trial: a beacon stone on the great plain, a shadow within a shadow, pointing back at Deathfire, which had consumed the ashes of the warrior the obelisk memorialised.

Vulkan reached the monument to N'bel. Since one father was silent, he had come to speak to the other.

'It has been too long,' Vulkan said. 'I have been consumed with my labours. I am changed since last we spoke. Nocturne has changed also. Greatly.' He looked towards the horizon, thinking of the glow of the void shields around Themis. 'Do you recognise our world? Do you approve? I would like to think so. Our people are safer than they have ever been. They are protected by shields of a kind we would never have imagined before the coming of the Outlander. You might think them almost sorcerous. They are not. They are a work of craft, and so they can be improved upon. I have done so. So yes, our people are safe.'

Fire passed over him again. The plain shook. Vulkan drank in the strength, the violence and the raw geologic life of Nocturne. The stirring of the deep drakes sent vibrations up from the depths of the world. They ran through Vulkan's armour and along his spine.

'We have changed the face of Nocturne,' Vulkan said. 'We have pushed what is natural back from the cities. We have pushed back its beauty, as we must when that beauty is too lethal.'

He paused. He reached out and placed his palm against the obelisk, against the deep engravings of a hammer and drake flanking a huge forge. 'I am sorry I was gone so long.' *Too long for N'bel,* Vulkan thought sadly, who had died before his return. 'I saw much. I learned much. I will be going away again soon, I think, and I will be taking my sons with me. Safeguarding the people on Nocturne is not enough. The dangers that encompass humanity in the galaxy threaten our home as surely as they do every other world. And the Great Crusade needs us. The Emperor needs us. His dream cannot only be based on conquest.' He thought about Ranknar, and how close the war to bring that world into compliance had come to becoming a war of extermination. 'There must be protection too. There must be sanctuary. Or there is nothing upon which to build.'

Vulkan circled the monument, his pace steady, untroubled by the tremors rippling through the plain. 'I have missed you, father,' he said. 'In the years since my return, not a day has passed that I did not wish you could be part of the great work here. I wish you could see Nocturne's Legion.' He pressed his lips together in a tight smile. 'Father,' he said, 'can *you* tell me when we march?'

Golden light glinted in the corner of his right eye. Vulkan whirled and saw a huge figure walked towards him through fire and ash. Though it was night, the figure's armour shone like the sun. It was the Outlander. A psychic wind blew His red cape and His long, dark hair. The handsome face was as pale as it had been when Vulkan had first beheld it, before he had known the apparition's true identity.

The vision was translucent. Vulkan saw through the Outlander to the slopes of Deathfire. Even so, the figure's majesty was barely diminished by the absence of His physical presence. Vulkan felt as he always did when he gazed upon the Emperor. He was humbled and inspired in equal measure by the greatness before him.

'Look to the Taras System, my son,' the Emperor said. 'Look to Antaeum.'

'What will I find there?'

'Your other sons. For more than a year, they have been fighting the orks in the Taras Division. They have need of you now.'

'A year!' Vulkan exclaimed.

'They have done much,' said the Emperor. 'But they have reached the end. Soon, they will be able to do nothing more.'

'Why did you not tell me sooner?'

'They were not ready for you until this moment, and you were not ready for them,' the Emperor told him. 'Go to Antaeum. Save the old Legion.'

'I will forge a new one,' Vulkan promised.

'Forge the *true* Legion,' said the Emperor.

THREE

JOURNEY / BAIT / ENDING

Knowledge without wisdom is ashes. Duty without belief is a husk. Protection without care is a cleft anvil.

– Vulkan, *Maxims*

The huge dome was constructed out of layers of adamantium and basalt. It opened with a groan of thunder. The land shook with the steady vibrations of its movement. The four quarters of the dome pulled away from one another. It was as if a mountain were withdrawing into the ground. The glow of the forges within lit up Nocturne's predawn. In the distance, the lights of Hesiod bore witness as the great device below was slowly lifted to the surface by pneumatic pillars as thick as the legs of a Warlord Titan. A squadron of lifters descended over the forge. They moved into position, then hovered, lowering transport clamps to seize the machine.

Inside the forge, forward of the now immense open space where the machine was revealed in its entirety, Vulkan stood on the gallery overlooking the tanks. He addressed the assembled ranks of his warriors.

'Legionaries of the Eighteenth,' he said, 'you are sons of Nocturne, you are my sons and, through me, you are the sons of the Emperor. Today, you begin your Crusade. Today, we go to find your brothers. We go to fight at their sides. We will go to them, and you will know them to be your brothers, and you will know that the galaxy is your home, and that our great arm is the shield for all of humankind.'

With a deep howl, the lifters began to raise the machine from the forge.

‘Look!’ Vulkan said, pointing to the immense construction as it began to climb into the sky. ‘There is a piece of the history of this Legion. It served your brothers who are now on Antaeum, and you have served it by remaking it stronger. Through it, the union has already begun to be forged. See its power! See what it represents! See in it the beginning of what this Legion will truly be.

‘And now let us march!’

His sons in their thousands roared, pledging their loyalty to him. Then the tank engines rumbled to life, and they began to move up the ramp towards the waiting heavy lifters.

They had heard Vulkan. He knew they had listened. He did not doubt they accepted what he had said. What he was not sure about was whether they believed his words with the fire he needed. It would have to burn hot to shape them as it must.

T’kell was waiting for Rhy’tan when he emerged from the reclusiam of the battleship *Flamewrought*.

‘Were you on the bridge when we left Nocturne?’ T’kell asked.

‘I was,’ said Rhy’tan. ‘I took leave of our world and did so on your behalf as well, brother.’

‘My thanks.’

Rhy’tan nodded. ‘Accepting our duty does not diminish the pain of departure. Knowing that we are not abandoning Nocturne does not extinguish the impression of doing so.’

T’kell did not answer. There was no need for him to do so. The instinct to protect the home world was ingrained in the very being of every native of Nocturne. The elevation to Legiones Astartes did not change that. The instinct defined who they were. Rhy’tan understood what Vulkan taught as the new, wider duty of protection. He understood, but did not feel the calling as he knew he should.

‘Now that the wait is over, are you less troubled?’ he asked T’kell.

They began walking in the direction of the amphitheatre that lay in the centre of the troop holds. There, the Igniax could address all the legionaries on the battleship. He had not done so before, but he had been meditating in the reclusiam with this purpose in mind.

After a pause, T’kell said, ‘I am glad our mission has begun.’ Then he added, ‘I am grateful for the sense of purpose.’ The way he said *purpose* made it sound as he if were seeking the correct motive power of an engine. T’kell had a tendency to think in terms of straightforward, mechanical cause and effect. He did not handle uncertainty of any kind with grace.

‘We have our purpose,’ Rhy’tan said. ‘But…?’

‘Am I that transparent?’

‘We are that close.’

‘Our distant brothers of the Eighteenth…’ said T’kell. He hesitated.

‘You wonder what lesson we are truly going to learn,’ Rhy’tan finished for him.

‘Perhaps,’ said T’kell. ‘You do as well?’

‘All our questions will be answered.’ Rhy’tan decided there were some doubts he should only express to the primarch. But he also decided he would not speak in the amphitheatre today. He shared too many of the same questions, and he did not trust his answers.

‘Do you think we will arrive at Antaeum in time?’ T’kell asked.

‘The Emperor chose this moment to reveal our mission for a reason,’ Rhy’tan said carefully.

‘That reason might not be their salvation.’

Rhy’tan grimaced.

‘*They’ve taken the bait,*’ Numeon cried over the vox. ‘*Very obedient, these greenskins.*’

‘Predictable in their savagery,’ said Vaughn as he moved south from the volcanic cone. ‘Let us give them their reward.’

The lava plain swarmed with the xenos horde. Orks descended from the attack moon and the hulks in a perpetual drop on the other side of the volcanic chain that bordered the plain to the south. They advanced, a tide with no ebb, towards the Legion’s base.

The fixed gun emplacements of the fortress opened fire, pounding the distant ranks of the orks. The XVIII’s heavy armour was concentrated at the foot of the volcano. The base was inaccessible to the tanks unless they were airlifted, but they had some mobility in the region that was relatively untouched by the lava flows. They hammered the middle distance, and Vaughn led his legionaries out to meet the orks that made it through both layers of barrage. There were plenty.

Disciplined cadres of legionaries smashed into the disorganised swarms of the xenos and hurled them back. They marched over the congealed flows and jagged outcroppings of the plain. Two armies clashed over an ocean of rock frozen in mid-storm. Vaughn fired his combi-bolter in short, controlled bursts, sweeping left and right, blowing apart snarling bodies.

‘We advance to the edge of our bombardment,’ he ordered. ‘Then retreat and pull them back through the gauntlet.’ He voxed the base, contacting Tech-Priest Xerexenia.

‘*Lord commander*,’ she said.

‘Do we have auspex readings of the volcano?’ He needed to know about any eruption before it happened. With that foreknowledge, he might be able to turn the volcano into the Legion’s greatest artillery piece.

‘*All sensors deployed, lord commander. The data stream is satisfactory.*’

A massive brute leapt over a lava formation and seized Vaughn. It wielded an axe whose blade was not sharp but could smash a mortal’s limbs like twigs. The greenskin struck the blade against the side of Vaughn’s head. His ears rang, but his helm repelled the blow. Furious, the ork opened jaws that could snap a man in half and bit the helm. Its teeth shattered. Disgusted, Vaughn drove his power sword through the beast’s neck. He thrust the dead monster away and hurled himself at the next greenskin.

‘Is this not the war we have deserved?’ he shouted to his troops. He grinned fiercely. ‘This is our battlefield, and they die in it!’

He looked ahead and saw waves of orks still coming, an infinity of foes. *A good war*, he thought. *If we end, we end well.*

The orks had brought their artillery, but it was too spread out to be effective. Their fire was undisciplined, raining everywhere on the plain and at the base. It was more of a threat to the greenskins than it was to the Legion. A shell landed a few metres away from Vaughn. The explosion knocked him into the air, but he landed on his feet. Legionary Orasus was down beside him. Vaughn picked him back up, blasting away the three orks that had jumped on him and were trying to tear off his armour.

They reformed the squad and moved forwards again.

‘There will be songs for this battle,’ Orasus said.

‘So there shall be,’ Vaughn answered, his rebreather bringing the smell of spent fyceline through the stink of sulphur. *Can there be a song without a singer?* he wondered. No, but there was music now: the deep, throbbing pulse of the Legion’s guns; the counterpoint of the endless, rippling boom of explosions; the choir of greenskin voices raised in pain and distress as they were blown up and shot by the score, by the hundreds, soon by the thousands; and another rhythm, that of marching and killing, boots against rock, shells against flesh.

A war with no retreat. There was glory in that. *Have we been looking for this?* came the thought. *For all our history, is this the war we have been seeking?*

Vaughn forced his thoughts back to the present, to waging the war for as long as possible. He voxed Resalt for her status.

‘*We are holding on, lord commander*,’ she said. ‘*The greenskins are focused on landing their troops.*’

‘Harry their fleet to the extent that you can,’ said Vaughn.

‘*I will not sacrifice this ship unnecessarily,*’ Resalt reassured him, ‘*but we will be useful in this war.*’

In this last war, Vaughn heard in her voice. *We all know,* he thought. *All of us.*

There can be joy in this. There can be joy in an ending.

The amphitheatre was carved from a single, massive slab of basalt. Unbroken, seamless, it was as if Nocturne had shaped it deliberately, a gathering place for its sons, a celebration of its warriors. At first glance, it was a work of dark, monolithic simplicity, an embodiment of strength. Closer up, it revealed the craft of the artisan. Each ring of seats was engraved with the monsters of Nocturne, monsters whose reality made them no less beings of myth. Proud *drygnirrs* and *dactylids* coiled across the surface of the stone, symbols of the indomitably resilient life of Nocturne, as hard as the world that challenged it. There was beauty in this life. It was precious, though there was nothing fragile about it. The engravings were exquisite and as indestructible as their subjects.

The amphitheatre was empty but for the Igniax seated midway down its slope. Rhy’tan looked up as Vulkan entered from the top starboard archway. His face was as strong as his doubts. Vulkan read the pain there, and it pained him in turn. Rhy’tan had not found the faith he needed.

It was not a faith that Vulkan could impose.

‘You thought the end of the waiting would be the end of doubts,’ Vulkan said, as he joined Rhy’tan.

‘I did,’ Rhy’tan admitted. ‘I was wrong. I apologised once for my doubts, Lord Vulkan.’

‘And I told you not to.’

‘You did. But I beg forgiveness again, and I must, because I have failed in my duty, and so I have failed you.’ He gestured at the empty space about them. ‘If I spoke in here now, it would be a lie.’

‘I would not ask that of you,’ Vulkan said. ‘I never would.’ He sat beside the Igniax. ‘So speak your truth.’

Rhy’tan sighed. ‘The mission of the Terran Eighteenth,’ he said. ‘It is hopeless without us.’

‘It is.’

‘There is no guarantee that we will arrive in time.’

‘Empirically, there is not. But I have faith in my father. He would not send us on a pointless quest.’

‘Forgive me, but what if its failure is the point? I do not wish to say that the

Eighteenth of Terra is dying for nothing. Its stand is as noble as it is heroic. It is what I would do to preserve my charges in the same situation. But this is the situation they have pursued time and again. I see the pattern, lord primarch, and it is the pattern of extinction. Perhaps extinction is the lesson.'

'It is not,' said Vulkan. 'Unless we fail in our duty. The Terran Eighteenth will not vanish because we will save it from extinction. We will preserve it and we will join it, and *that* will be the lesson.'

The desire for hope appeared in Rhy'tan's eyes, though his doubts clearly remained.

Vulkan clapped him on the shoulder and walked back up the slope of the great amphitheatre. The sound of his boot steps rang hollowly in the emptiness.

I will fill what is empty, he vowed. *On the anvil of this war, I will make a great alloy.*

Vaughn had lost count of the days. After the first ten, they ceased to have meaning. He could check his chronometer, but there was little point. The numbers felt too much like a countdown to the end, between the rain of sulphur and the rain of shells. There was virtually no difference between day and night: the lightening of the grey of ash during the former and the brighter glow of the eruptions during the latter were the only markers. There was no pause to the war, no respite. The orks attacked as if this was the climatic moment of the battle.

Vaughn was in the base, replenishing his ammunition, when Xerexenia contacted him over the vox, asking for an audience in the command centre.

He made his way there through the medicae. Every surgical table was occupied by a wounded brother. Fimbrus, the Chief Apothecary of the Legion, directed the attempts to save their lives. He nodded briefly to Vaughn and bent back down to the work of amputating the left leg of a still-conscious legionary. Vaughn passed from table to table, softly speaking words of solidarity and thanks to his brothers.

The gesture felt like a farewell.

The mood in the command centre was less sombre. Xerexenia existed in a state of perpetual curiosity and interest. Vaughn was convinced the tech-priest would study the process of her own demise with delighted satisfaction.

'Another magma build-up,' Xerexenia said when Vaughn joined her. 'To the south and in this peak.' One of the mechadendrites sprouting from her hunched back gestured at the pict screens.

'So soon after the last surge,' Vaughn marvelled. He looked at the stream of red in the geologic readings. Antaeum was a planet in permanent agony,

seeking to wrench itself apart. An eruption of the cone in the centre of the lava field was imminent, and there was an enormous spike in pressure across the chain of volcanoes to the south. ‘How soon?’ Vaughn asked.

Xerexenia chattered briefly in binaric, then said, ‘Four hours.’

‘That will slow the orks down,’ Vaughn said, seeing an opportunity. ‘They cannot cross the mountains during the eruptions. Their landing site will be cut off from the plain. That will give us the chance to cut down the army between here and the mountain range in the plain. So we will push them hard now. We will advance with the heavy armour and drive them back. When the eruptions come, we will force them into the fire.’ He did not give in to the blandishments of a dream of victory. But they might delay the orks’ progress, gaining themselves and the populations they were defending a bit more time. That would be triumph enough, and then they would fight on, day by day, moment by moment.

Xerexenia’s prediction was accurate. The southern chain unleashed its rage first, even as the tank formations rumbled into the plain. Greenskins fell, crushed beneath the treads, while squads of infantry marched beside the vehicles, creating an impassable wall that exterminated the orks in a swath that widened out from the base of the cone. While the Whirlwinds took up the rear, their clusters of missiles unleashing chains of explosions in the ork ranks in the middle distance, Vaughn had the battle tanks concentrate their fire on the nearer range. The concentrated fire was devastating. The XVIII advanced slowly, methodically, and it was a march of annihilation.

When the eruptions began, it was as if Antaeum was responding to Vaughn’s commands and the planet had chosen to ally itself with the Legion against the greenskin plague. The earth shook, hurling smaller orks off their feet, as ash clouds blotted out the horizon. The sky-shattering booms rolled over the lava plain, bursting eardrums and staggering infantry. The Legion’s volcano exploded with renewed violence minutes later, flows of molten rock and mud running down its sides and into the plain, but the built-up ridge on the southern end of the crater still held.

Vaughn rode in the turret of *Ethnarch’s Doom*, scything down the greenskins with its pintle-mounted twin-linked combi-bolter. The sponson lascannons blasted through the xenos flesh ahead of the tank, while the accelerator cannon punished the orks with a holocaust of high explosives. Visibility was poor, and what Vaughn could see was the madness of war and volcanic mayhem so utter, coherence was lost.

An image flashed through his mind. In the early stages of the Great Crusade, at a gathering of the commanding officers of the Legions, Vaughn had been

received by the Emperor's Children aboard the *Pride of the Emperor*. The flagship was home to a tremendous number of remembrancers, and as Fulgrim, primarch of the Emperor's Children, guided him through one of the ship's great galleries of art, Vaughn had been struck by the power of one painting in particular. The canvas was massive, easily six metres high and twice as wide. It was a swirl of movement, dusky colours in collision with one another, streaked with ragged glimpses of bright red and orange. That painting was non-representational, and it conveyed an overwhelming sense of upheaval.

'Compelling, isn't it?' Fulgrim had said.

'What is it?'

'It is war. It is, in my estimation, one of the most perceptive depictions of war I have ever seen. When I look at this, I see the inevitable chaos our Crusade courts in every conflict, and a warning about the maelstrom unfettered war can become. When I look at this painting, I am reminded again of why I insist upon perfection in every aspect of my Legion's conduct in battle. Without discipline, this is what awaits us.'

Vaughn saw the painting again now. He saw it in his mind's eye, and he saw it before him in a reality thrown into monstrous vortex. He felt as if the world no longer had form. He was surrounded by the annihilation of greenskin flesh by fire and shell, and buffeted by explosions. There was no true sense of distance now, only more of the violent grey, the sear of lightning and flares of colour that dimmed and smeared into the grey as soon as they appeared. Vaughn was fighting his way through the infinite sea of the painting. This was the war rendered abstract. It seemed as though everything would be dissolved into the embodiment of conflict. Part of him felt this would not be a terrible thing.

But the rest of Vaughn was still lord commander of the XVIII Legion. What was happening was his will, his strategy, his turning of the world against the orks. And now, to his left and to his right, came the terrible heat of the lava flows, a short distance beyond the flanks of the Legion's formations. A slow wave of lava three metres high swallowed the orks. The greenskins' screams as they died were faint beneath the overwhelming roar of the shelling and the eruptions, but it was the sound that Vaughn most wanted to hear.

He voxed Xerexenia at the Cauldron. 'What are you seeing?' The long-range auspex array might still be able to give a sense of the broader battlefield.

'*It is as you predicted, lord commander. The reinforcements to the south have been cut off. The army on the plain has already been significantly degraded. The ork landing appears to be compromised. The number of crashes has increased with the eruptions. We…*' She paused. There was a squeal of

recalculating binaric. ‘*Lord commander, one of their ships is making for the plain.*’

‘Are they attempting a landing here?’ If the orks succeeded, they would destroy the opportunity to contain the xenos the eruptions had given the XVIII.

‘*Success is impossible. The attempt is not improbable.*’

Vaughn glanced up. He could not see the sky. There would be no way of anticipating where the ship would hit before it was too late. He sent out the warning all the same. He wondered if the orks were seeking the same kind of destructive sacrifice they had done on Corcyra.

Xerexenia contacted him again. ‘*Lord commander, the course of the ship will not take it to the plain. The flight path is towards the peak of the central volcano.*’

Was that chance or strategy? Vaughn wondered. Did the pilots of that ship even know what they were doing? The answer hardly mattered. There never seemed to be true thought behind ork behaviour, but the brutality of the greenskins, again and again and again, was favoured by bafflingly unlikely chance, as if their savagery itself were enough to bend the laws of physics and probability.

‘*Impact in five seconds,*’ Xerexenia warned.

Vaughn saw a streak pass by overhead, a glow of fire or of engines. There was the shrieking, rattling roar of primitive technology. Then the unmistakeable crash of ship against rock. There came a flare high in the north, a new anger in the sky and the rumble of rockslides, growing louder and louder. Then a glow, a red glow.

Lava flow. The warning spread over the vox, but there was little action to take. Xerexenia’s sensors had confirmed the strength of the ridge. The direction of the eruption’s blast had been known. The contingency of a ship this large hitting at just this spot had been close to unimaginable.

It was also the one event for which there was no contingency. There was no high ground to seek, no shelter to take. There was only fate to curse. The crash had destroyed the protective ridge of the crater. The doom Vaughn had brought to the orks now came for them all.

Vaughn kept fighting and moving forwards. Reports and commands on the vox chronicled the coming disaster.

‘*We’re cut off on the east flank. Can we shift the columns west?*’

‘*Negative. It’s a sea on this side.*’

‘*Lava hitting the Cauldron.*’

‘*This is rooftop artillery. We can maintain fire for now. Be strong, brothers.*’

There was no recourse except to get as far ahead as possible of the new

stream of lava. It might extinguish itself, lose its greater force before it reached the Legion.

The vox squealed as contact with the Cauldron cut off.

‘If we die, they die with us!’ Vaughn called to all who could still hear. ‘This is our retaliation! This is their immolation!’

The glow grew brighter. The heat rose. The guns pounded, and the orks died. Vaughn was truly in the reality of the painting. That remembrancer had known the deep truth of war in a way that no one, Vaughn thought, not even Fulgrim, could have suspected.

And now the lava was here, and suddenly there was no land. There was only the ocean of fire, and *Ethnarch’s Doom* was rising end over end.

Everything dropped into a monstrous forge.

On the *Klostzatz*, klaxons sounded as tacticarium screens updated to show new, threatening enemy vectors. ‘Greenskin vessels are changing their orientation,’ the auspex officer, Denhorn, reported. ‘They’re leaving orbit.’

‘All ships,’ Resalt said. ‘Prepare to engage the main force of the enemy. They’re heading for us.’

‘*You are not surprised,*’ said Valtine, the shipmaster of the frigate *Flame of the Caucasus*.

‘The eruptions are preventing the greenskins from landing. They need to turn their attentions elsewhere.’

‘*What are your orders?*’

‘What they always have been. There is no retreat, shipmaster. Antaeum is where we stop them. There is nowhere to go.’

‘The attack moon is leaving orbit too,’ said the auspex officer.

‘Fleet, form up,’ said Resalt. ‘Close the gaps between our ships, concentrate fire ahead.’ She looked at the tacticarium screens and saw the scale of the swarm heading for the *Klostzatz*. The situation was the same as it had been over Corcyra. There was nothing to do but go forwards now. ‘To all commanders, we will be a spear tip. Our target is the attack moon. In the name of the Emperor, we will exact a heavy cost.’

Two kinds of war closed with one another. The differences between them were so great that Resalt thought them obscene. It offended her that there should be a battle at all with these creatures, that a single ship of hers should be damaged by them. That orks should exist at all was an outrage. The Emperor taught humanity what the galaxy could and must be. Greenskins were everything it should not be. There was no thought in them, no civilisation. There was only the rampaging exultation of violence. If there were true justice in the universe, they would fall back before the glory of the

Imperium and be shamed into extinction.

Resalt knew what was coming. She had fought so long for the XVIII Legion, and had been through so many desperate struggles, that she had a taste for the last stand too. She had no regrets. She felt herself beginning to smile as she thought about how she would end as many orks as she could. She would find glory today. More importantly, she would find meaning.

The last of the XVIII's fleet came together as the swarm approached. Torpedoes and cannon shells and lances cut the void, incinerating mockeries that dared to take the shape of vessels. The orks fired back. Some of their ships exploded as they attempted to engage, dying without being struck by a single Imperial shell. But there were always more. The swarm grew thicker. Ork ships collided with each other in their eagerness to take on the enemy.

But there were always more.

And the attack moon loomed in the centre of the ork fleet, the greatest monster.

The Imperial spear cut into the swarm, and the ork swarm embraced the spear. The *Klostzatz*'s fire destroyed any vessel that dared to approach head-on. The fleet cut down scores of flanking vessels, but always, always, there were more. Some of the enemy got through. Some of their shots got through.

Enough got through.

The escort *Barbican* died. The frigate *Might of Honour* died. The spear tip became ragged.

Resalt grasped the pulpit as ram ships collided with the hull, and primitive ork shells battered the void shields. The defences of the *Klostzatz* were weakened. The void shields went down more easily, and the hull was breached in a dozen places.

'Fire control minimal,' announced the flat voice of a servitor linked to the ship's weapon systems.

In the oculus, Resalt saw the distant blooms of cannon and torpedo impacts on the surface of the attack moon. 'Are we damaging it?' she asked Denhorn.

'It is hard to get any kind of coherent reading. We must be, but nothing deep, as far as the auspex can tell. The density of its construction is too great.'

Brute force, Resalt thought. *Its brutishness is going to defeat us.*

'Port cannons down,' said the servitor.

'Redirect what we can,' Resalt ordered. 'Target the ork staging ground on Antaeum.' The battleship was too far from the planet for a true orbital bombardment, but any damage to the enemy force on the ground would mean something. The *Klostzatz's* fate was sealed, and there was only one last thing it might do against the ork base.

'We keep going,' Resalt said. 'No retreat.'

A few seconds later, the last of its bombardment torpedoes blasted out of its flanks, making for Antaeum.

Valtine said, '*We've lost steering. They've opened up a breach along half our length. We're losing atmosphere fast. Farewell. Our course runs true. We will kill them as we die.*'

'So will we, shipmaster. So will we.'

The attack moon loomed. Another ram ship came up beneath the *Klostzatz*. The impact sent a mortal shudder through the ship. Power stuttered. Pict screens blacked out across the bridge.

'Engine breach,' droned the damage control servitor. 'Plasma leaking.'

'Will they go critical?' Resalt asked.

'That is certain.'

'Good. We shall go for the attack moon now.'

A solemn silence fell on the bridge. The crew faced the inevitable, collectively willing the battleship forwards to the ork base.

'We have one more torpedo,' Resalt announced. 'It is our greatest. We will be the death blow.' She wanted to believe that. She wanted to believe this end would have meaning. The *Klostzatz* was twenty-four kilometres long. With its engines breached, the ship would crack the attack moon open like an egg. Its explosion would scour the interior, and its force would break the monster apart.

Surely, this is what would happen. Surely, destiny would permit no other ending.

'Get me the lord commander,' Resalt said.

'We have lost contact with the Cauldron,' Denhorn said.

'Very well. Record vox transmission.' Resalt hoped Vaughn would hear her in the end. 'We will ram the attack moon. We will destroy the heart of the enemy's fleet. My only regret, lord commander, is that I will not live to see what we achieve.'

Now the ork base filled the entire oculus. Resalt could no longer see the contours of the mass. She realised that the *Klostzatz* was striking at the orks much as the orks had struck the Legion on Corcyra. Her chest clenched. There were no longer two kinds of war here. There was only one. The fleet was dead. It was simply moving forwards, becoming merely brutish. The orks were forcing the XVIII to fight as they did. Resalt wanted to cry out in soul-deep pain.

But she held her silence. Resalt stood to attention with her crew as the great ship plunged towards the surface of the attack moon.

Let this have meaning, she thought. *Let this have meaning*.

But in the final seconds before impact, she knew their deaths would not.

There was darkness. Darkness and black pain. Then darkness gave way to the red, to heat and agony. The heat *was* agony. The warning runes were shutting down in Vaughn's auto-senses. His body was slipping towards a sus-an membrane coma. He was being crushed. Everything was heat, nothing could vent, but he was conscious.

Vaughn punched at the weight. He punched with all the fury of approaching death, and he felt the weight shift. He punched again and again, and then he could move. Determination blunted the blade of the red pain, and the weight gave way before him. Then he was lifting it, and then he threw it away.

Now he could see. He pulled himself out of the wreckage of the Fellblade. The lava had pushed the Legion's heavy armour together in a great hill of ruined metal. Congealing rock still glowed a sullen red between the masses of the tanks. Some had exploded, others were crushed, but most of them had been resilient enough to keep their crews alive. The vehicles were dead, but the legionaries lived on, and they crawled from burst hatches and torn hulls. Beneath the hill of tanks, Vaughn saw motionless limbs protruding from the lava flow. He did not want to think how many of the legionaries marching with the tanks had perished, but more had survived than he could have hoped. They too were climbing the hill.

The ash fall was still intense, and Vaughn could not see clearly for more than a hundred metres in any direction. But that was an improvement. The dying glow of the lava gave him a hint of where the battle stood. In the midst of the destruction of the molten rock, there was a moment of calm. Some of the lava was still glowing in the near distance. Thousands of orks had been engulfed. Half-buried, burned, bestial faces were scattered across the battlefield. The landscape was a slowly shifting cemetery and crematorium. The ash fell, choking and smothering, grey descending upon smouldering orange and black.

Through the drifting smoke came a new chorus of savage cries.

'Lord commander,' said Numeon. He had already made it to the top of the wreckage. He reached down and pulled Vaughn up beside him. He looked out towards the shouts. 'They have not had enough yet,' he said.

'They will only have had enough when there are none left,' said Vaughn.

He stood up, making himself visible to the surviving legionaries. He could see a little further from this position. There were others who had lived through the flood. They were making their way from ruined tanks, across the thickening crust. 'To me!' Vaughn shouted. He looked back towards the volcano. He could not see the Cauldron. He did not know if there was anything to go back to, but they would have to try. 'To me!' he called again. 'Form up! We have not yet finished the greenskins' punishment!'

The orks came into sight, scrambling over the congealing lava. Some broke through the crust and died, but the surface was already strong enough to support the weight of most of the brutes.

‘Take them down,’ Vaughn ordered. The heat inside his armour had diminished, and he could think more clearly. He focused on the task of killing. ‘Give our returning brothers cover. Flamers at the base, bolters on high. Let no greenskin approach!’

The hill of wreckage erupted with fire.

No squad had been left intact by the lava flood, but the rump of the XVIII Legion gathered on the hill fought with precision and discipline. The barrage was continuous, brothers redirecting their aim to take down enemies approaching legionaries who were reloading or racing to the mound. The destroyed tanks became a new fortress. The orks closed in relentlessly, but the legionaries held them back, and the heaps of greenskin corpses grew. More surviving warriors fought their way through the orks and added their strength to the hill.

‘We can hold them a long time from this position,’ said Numeon, placing shell bursts with devastating accuracy.

‘We cannot do so indefinitely,’ Vaughn said.

‘That was never a possibility anywhere, was it?’

‘No.’ The image of the last of the Legion standing fast on a monument of tanks had the romance of glory, but no. The end was not yet. If there was still any way of carrying out his duty, he must take it. ‘Legionary Orasus,’ he voxed, ‘attempt to make contact with the Cauldron. Our walls are strong enough to have withstood what felled us out here.’

Large movements in the ash called Vaughn’s attention. There was something big out there, and moving fast. ‘South-west quadrant,’ he warned.

The enemy came into view. It was an ork chieftain, and it was a colossus. The crude armour it wore was thick enough to be the plating of a Land Raider, yet seemed an unnecessary ornamentation on the monster’s pillar-like limbs. It smashed through its underlings, trampling them underfoot, even as they howled in celebration. A great leader had come to destroy their foe.

The chieftain advanced in a fast, loping run. It was more than twice Vaughn’s size. One hand held a huge, crude gun. Its barrel was wide as a cannon. The other hand was encased in a power claw that looked as if it could tear through the hull of a battleship. The ork roared, the sound coming from deep in its chest, as loud as a new eruption.

The lava crust gave way under its right foot. It sank up to its thigh and leapt out without pause, the burning lava on its leg doing no more than goading it forwards. It was as if Antaeum had spat out a monster forged from fire and

rock and animalistic rage.

The other orks surged forwards with new energy as they sought to cover the wreckage in the ocean of their flesh. The Legion's fire held them back, but barely. The arrival of the chieftain was galvanising their frenzy.

While the rest of the guns pounded the advancing tide, Vaughn and Numeon fired at the chieftain. Their bolter shells punched rents into its armour. The greenskin laughed and ran faster, its jaws wide in greeting, welcoming the fight.

To the rear, there was another blast from the volcano, another shattering of rock and the hissing grind of approaching destruction.

The chieftain lunged forwards and landed on the hill. Legionary Dexius slashed his chainaxe at the beast, but the greenskin snapped his head off with its power claw. The monster did not even look at the dead warrior. Its attention was focused on the peak, on Vaughn.

'Come on then!' Vaughn shouted.

Numeon hurled a frag grenade, but the ork batted it aside, the blast insignificant against its claw, and came on up, crushing the legionaries in its path. The air was growing hotter and turning red again. Another lava flow was near.

'*I have the Cauldron!*' Orasus voxed. '*It still stands. The walls are not breached.*'

The chieftain reached the peak.

'Pull back to the Cauldron,' Vaughn ordered. A fighting withdrawal would give them the chance to regroup, get off the defensive and strike again. And if they stopped the chieftain here, that would be a grievous wound to the orks' morale.

Vaughn stabbed his power sword forwards as the chieftain closed with him. He cut through the metal of the monster's jagged helmet. The beast snarled and heaved itself to one side. The powerblade sliced its ear off.

Numeon flanked right, sending bolter shells into its side, while below, the legionaries began to pull away from the hill of ruined tanks, cutting through the surrounding orks and starting the long march upslope through cooling lava to the Cauldron.

The ork ignored the shots striking it and fired its gun. Vaughn saw the barrel go up in time, and he ducked around a projecting cannon. The greenskin's shell exploded against the cannon, and shrapnel blew back in its face. It blinked and took a step back, and Vaughn came round at it, firing a full burst with his combi-bolter, the double stream of shells marching up the ork's chest. The beast threw itself down so quickly, it took only a grazing shot against its forehead. Numeon hit it again, strafing its left flank, breaking through the

massive plates. The ork swept its power claw out. The movement was as sudden as it was powerful. The claw struck Numeon in the chest and sent him flying. He dropped to the base of the wreckage, and the chieftain propelled itself at Vaughn with blinding speed. Vaughn recoiled and ran out of room on the peak. The smashed hulls fell away behind him. He threw himself back, letting himself fall, seizing the thought of luring the monster down to where Numeon could rejoin the fight. As he dropped, he raised his combi-bolter to fire at the ork as it came for him. The shells hit, blowing apart the beast's chest-plate, but the monster was so fast. It leapt after him, plunging partway down the slope of the hill. It snatched at Vaughn with the power claw, seizing him around the waist as it landed on an upturned Typhon. It pinned his arms to his sides, squeezed and suddenly a mountain chain was crushing his torso. Ceramite splintered, his right arm snapped and the combi-bolter fell from his paralysed fingers.

Vaughn roared in anger and defiance. He couldn't move. The ork stood on the peak and raised him high, bellowing in triumph, the jaws of the claw closing and closing. Vaughn's bones broke, his power pack crumpled and his armour became a coffin. His black carapace cracked and his lungs filled with fluid. The pain made a mockery of the heat that had burned him before, and it made a still more terrible mockery of his pride. There was no glory in this defeat. There was no glory in this ending.

'I will kill you yet!' he spat at the beast. He struggled but could not move.

The claw closed more tightly yet. It was going to cut him in half. The ork roared with laughter.

Vaughn's vision turned red, he thought from his own agony. Then he realised it was the air that was red, and the rumble he heard was not the blood in his ears. The ork chieftain snarled in anger as another lava wave struck the hill. Then Vaughn was falling as the beast was swept up by the molten rock. The chieftain struggled to reach him but was carried back by the surge. The ork howled, not in pain but in frustration.

And then the red and the black took him again.

Vaughn drifted in and out of consciousness. Sudden bursts of pain jolted him awake, and the same pain overwhelmed his senses and dropped him into oblivion again. He had the vague sensation of being dragged. There was heat and destruction, and somehow he was moving towards the volcano.

Once more, he was in the prophetic painting he had seen on the *Pride of the Emperor*, only now the violent movement of grey had turned into a lightning storm of black and red. He could see and know nothing except that he was in the worst chaos of war.

Not like this, he thought. Sometimes his lips moved. ‘Not like this.’ The ending too-long sought had come, and it was all wrong. Everything was wrong.

On the southern rampart of the Cauldron’s roof, where they stood guard, waiting for the orks to regroup, Legionary Saluran asked, ‘Does the lord commander live?’

‘He does,’ Orasus told him and the other three surviving members of his squad. ‘I heard him snarl when they moved him onto the medicae slab.’

Saluran, Caelius and Blasius greeted the news silently. Blasius was never talkative, and Saluran always took in whatever was hurled his way with calm, but it took a lot to make Caelius go quiet.

It was, in fact, Blasius who broke the silence. ‘Do you think he will fight again?’

‘He will want to,’ Saluran put in.

‘Of course he will want to,’ said Orasus. He hesitated. ‘I don’t know if he will be able to. His wounds…’

‘That bad?’ said Caelius.

‘So they seemed, from what I could see.’

Saluran grunted. He looked out down the slope of the cone, towards the plain, which still glowed here and there with molten rock. ‘At least he hurt the enemy badly too,’ he said. ‘And we will fight on for him.’

‘We will,’ Orasus agreed.

None of them asked for how long that would be possible.

Dark, then. A long period of dark. When Vaughn opened his eyes again, he was motionless. The light was dim, but it was not angry. It was steady, artificial. Lumen strips.

He was on a medicae table in the Cauldron, and his armour had been removed. Apothecary Fimbrus was working on him.

‘What…?’ Vaughn managed.

‘The withdrawal is complete.’

The voice was Numeon’s. With an effort that almost made him black out again, Vaughn turned his eyes to the right and saw the first captain.

‘All those who could, have reached the Cauldron,’ Numeon said.

Vaughn croaked, trying to speak.

‘The attempt to speak may be fatal, lord commander,’ said the Apothecary.

Vaughn ignored him. ‘How many?’ he asked.

Numeon grimaced. ‘Not enough,’ he said bitterly.

‘Briefing…’ Vaughn managed.

‘The surviving officers are gathered,’ Numeon said.

‘Take me there.’

‘Lord commander,’ Fimbrus protested.

‘Now. Keep me awake.’

Fimbrus obeyed. Even with a sudden influx of stimms, Vaughn kept greying out. He was not aware of being transferred from the apothecarion to the command module. He forced his eyes open, and he was looking at a mere handful of Praetors. He fought unconsciousness back, struggling to hold on to his grasp of his Legion’s situation. Fimbrus hovered over him, adjusting the stimms and monitoring his vital signs. He still could not move his limbs. Tubes ran from him to the medicae consoles, keeping him breathing.

‘The ork chieftain is still on the field,’ Numeon was saying. ‘It was wounded, but not badly. It has lost many of its underlings, however, too many for the greenskins to mount an attack on the Cauldron.’

‘So our strategy was successful to that extent,’ said Manius Silva, first captain of the decimated Fourth Company. He had lost an eye in the battle, and the left side of his face was an angry map of burns.

‘If that ship hadn’t struck the peak of the cone, we would have crushed them,’ growled Arion Vestus of the Fifth. His heavy-set features were streaked with ash. A deep gouge ran from forehead to chin.

‘Temporarily…’ Vaughn whispered. Even if the volcano had not caught the Legion too in its holocaust, the largest portion of the ork force was still in orbit and descending out of reach on the far side of the southern chain.

‘Temporarily,’ Numeon agreed. ‘And the eruptions are easing to the south. The ork reinforcements will come.’

‘What of the fleet?’ Silva asked.

‘The eruptions have destroyed our long-range vox capacity, but all signals have been lost on the auspex. There was a bombardment, and that may have bought us some time. But the landings have resumed.’

The darkness encroached on Vaughn again. With an effort, he hurled it back and forced words from his throat. ‘Damage to the Cauldron?’

‘Badly damaged,’ said Numeon. ‘The walls are holding for now. Another eruption like the last may be too much. We can hold an attack off, but not for long. We are hardly better off than we were on the remains of the tanks.’

‘Then we fight,’ said Vaughn. Pain seized him, as if the claw were around him once more, and his limbs rattled against the medicae table.

Fimbrus brought his narthecium close to Vaughn’s neck.

‘No coma,’ Vaughn rasped.

‘But my lord commander…’

‘I will be awake. When the time comes, I *will* be awake.’

Fimbrus nodded. ‘As you will, lord commander.’ He spoke with less

reluctance than respect.

‘First Captain Numeon,’ said Vaughn. ‘You have command of the battlefield. Direct the fight against the greenskins as you deem fit.’

Numeon lowered his head in acceptance. ‘I will not fail you, lord commander.’

A tacticarium screen flashed to life. Auspex readings scrolled down its length. Numeon turned and stared.

‘What is it?’ Vestus asked.

‘Someone has come,’ said Numeon. ‘A fleet has translated into the system.’

‘What fleet?’ said Vaughn, poised between hope and despair.

Numeon shook his head. ’Unknown.’

FOUR

BROTHERHOOD / THE VOICE / FLIGHT OF THE TERMITE

The Emperor created us for a specific purpose. When the events of the universe unfold in such a manner that we may fulfil that purpose, it is not a coincidence, nor is it predestination. It is the logical conclusion of our existence. We must know that purpose and, in the full understanding of who we are, embrace the duty that comes with that understanding.

– Vulkan, *Prometheus Reconsidered*

In the strategium of the *Flamewrought*, Vulkan looked at his assembled Praetors. There were seven of them, a division that honoured the great sanctuary cities of Nocturne. Rhy'tan was present too. Vulkan wanted the Igniax to bear witness to every important phase of this mission. Of all his sons, it was most important that Rhy'tan see and understand the truth of what he was seeking to accomplish.

A hololithic representation of Antaeum and the ork vessels dominated the tacticarium table. At its corners, pict screens were updating with new auspex readings as the Nocturnean force drew closer to its target.

'This is the entirety of the ork fleet?' said Reth Sho'mar. The Lord Protector of Hesiod's sharp features were accentuated by his shorn scalp and jagged spike of a beard.

'It is,' Vulkan answered. 'Your brothers have achieved the extraordinary. They have held the orks at Antaeum, all of them, and so spared the inhabited worlds of Taras.'

'I see no sign of the Terran fleet,' said Tukeren Na'shor of Epithemus. His

eyes were deep shadows under his heavy brow, and they glinted red, reflecting the light from the screen.

‘There is none,’ Rhy’tan confirmed. He pointed to a cluster of readings a relatively short distance from the orks. ‘That looks like a debris cloud, does it not?’

‘It does,’ Saral Kal’ma of Clymenne said. ‘So the Terrans must be at their limit. If they survive at all.’ His voice was harsh as the rasp of a saw blade.

‘The orks continue to attack a death world,’ Vulkan said. ‘Therefore someone is fighting them.’ He spoke evenly, without directly chiding Kal’ma. The lord protector was being honest in his appraisal of the situation, and Vulkan did not want that vital exchange between officers to suffer. At the same time, he would make it clear that the mission was the rescue of the XVIII as much as it was the defeat of the orks. Now he pointed at the attack moon. ‘That is the centre of the ork force. It is their greatest strength, and it is their greatest weakness. If they lose this base, they lose everything. So we shall take it from them.’

As Vulkan spoke, the data stream to the hololith updated again, and the detail of the ork structure increased in resolution. Scars appeared on the uneven surface of the agglomeration. Sho’mar leaned forwards, frowning. ‘What is that?’ he said, pointing to a particularly large wound on the attack moon.

‘A ship?’ Rhy’tan wondered.

Vulkan eyed the close-up of the scan on the pict screen to his left. The data stream updated again, and the details became clear. There was wreckage, enough intact to be recognisable. ‘An Imperial battleship,’ Vulkan said. While on Terra, he had made a study of the records of the XVIII. He knew its vessels. At the time of its departure for the Taras Division the XVIII had only one battleship. ‘That is the *Klostzatz*,’ he said.

The solemn silence around the tacticarium table lasted several seconds.

‘They rammed it,’ said Na’shor.

Vulkan nodded. ‘They must have tried, at the end, to break the crust of the attack moon.’

‘If they failed,’ Rhy’tan said, ‘if even a battleship could not crack that defence, then how are we to…’ He trailed off, and Vulkan watched his face change as he realised how the XVIII Nocturne would succeed. He stared back at Vulkan in astonishment.

Vulkan smiled. ‘We knew we would be fighting orks,’ he said. ‘Orks that have held a Legion at bay. For such work, one must prepare the correct tools.’ He looked at the rest of his commanders. ‘We have the weapons we need to annihilate the xenos fleet. And we have arrived in the Taras System at

precisely the moment your Terran brothers have the greatest need of us.’

Suddenly, the Praetors all seemed to have trouble meeting each other’s eyes.

‘You still have your doubts,’ Vulkan said. There was a noticeable difference between the Praetors’ readiness for battle and the way they mentioned the Terran XVIII. None of them questioned the mission, but they could not disguise the fact that they did not think the Terrans would still be alive by the time the Nocturneans made planetfall. He met Rhy’tan’s pained eyes and, with a nod, reminded him to speak freely.

‘Your doubts are universal,’ Vulkan said.

‘That is not what I would have wished.’

‘Never be ashamed of reality.’ Then he addressed the Praetors. ‘You do not believe we will rescue the Eighteenth.’

‘My lord primarch,’ said Sho’mar, ‘the auspex readings are clear. The orks have landed in overwhelming numbers. Even if no more arrived…’

Vulkan held up a hand. ‘I see the scans too, Reth. My conclusions differ. I know your brothers will hold, and you will reach them. I understand too, that you do not believe we will get there in time. You do me, then, a great honour by being no less willing to fight.’

‘We believe in our victory, my lord primarch. We believe in you.’

‘Our forging will be complete in this battle,’ said Kal’ma.

‘Yes,’ Vulkan said, slowly and deliberately. ‘Yes, it will be. Lord Protectors Sho’mar and Kal’ma, I want you and eight companies to join me in the attack on the ork base. With one thousand legionaries, we will pierce that structure to its core. Once we are at sufficient depth, we will place seismic charges.’

‘How many will we need?’ Sho’mar asked.

‘Seven of the ones we have on this ship will suffice.’

The seismic charges on the *Flamewrought* were also one of Vulkan’s modifications of design. They were several times larger than the standard battlefield seismic charge. It took two legionaries to carry each bomb, and the explosives were an order of magnitude more powerful than their smaller kin.

‘They must detonate simultaneously and not from a single point.’ Vulkan held up a fist. ‘Once we reach our target depth, one company will remain with me, and we will fight to keep the greenskins’ focus on us. The rest of the strike force will radiate out from that position and place the charges at a distance.’ He opened his fingers wide. ‘That will ensure the extent and pressure of interior rupturing required to shatter the greenskin base to dust.’

‘How far will we travel from your centre?’ said Kal’ma.

‘That we cannot know until we discover the composition and density of the attack moon.’

The two Praetors nodded.

‘These hulks,’ Vulkan went on, ‘will be the targets for the boarding assaults by the rest of you.’ He tapped the controls of the tacticarium table, lighting up conglomerations of wrecks that were smaller than the base, but still huge troop carriers.

‘So ordered,’ the Praetors said in unison, committing themselves to the war that would hammer the untempered blade of the Legion into its most perfect self.

On Vaughn’s instructions, the command module of the Cauldron had been made his permanent residence. He was anchored to a mobile medicae slab, tangles of tubes and mechadendrites feeding stimms and fluids into him. Nothing seemed to be able to counteract the pain. Through determination alone, Vaughn made himself think coherently. Nothing mattered except his duty to his brothers. And now he had to consider the new reality of another fleet in the system. He wanted to believe it represented aid for the XVIII, but his Legion had been left to fight on its own for so long, he could not assume the best. The ships might be hostile. He would see the truth of this event, and he would see the battle to its end. His end had not come on the hill of tanks. He had a last chance to preserve his honour, and he accepted the agony as the price of terminal redemption.

‘Keep me awake,’ he ordered Fimbrus.

‘I can keep you awake,’ the Apothecary said. ‘I don’t know how long I can keep you alive.’

‘I don’t know how long I can keep any of us alive,’ Vaughn answered.

Numeon entered the chamber. ‘The orks are massing again,’ he said.

Vaughn’s lips pulled back in frustration. Every instinct pushed him to rise from the medicae bed and don his armour. He managed to raise his head, but his arms and legs remained motionless.

‘Lord commander?’ said Numeon, waiting respectfully for orders.

Relinquishing control of the field was agony. It was not the wounded pride of command that he felt. It was the sense that he was no longer fighting alongside his brothers. But he had turned the battlefield over to Numeon, and that decision was the right one. He had full confidence in Numeon. He could release his grip on consciousness and let himself try to heal. Except he could not. He would not surrender to oblivion while the war yet raged. ‘What are your plans?’ he asked.

‘We still have enough tank and infantry companies for a targeted sortie. We will use the Cauldron as bait and assault the ork flanks as they lay siege to our gates. We have found routes down the slopes to the east and west. The lava flow has changed the landscape enough to offer that possibility at least.’

Vaughn nodded, picturing the strategy, approving. He would have done the same. ‘That will slow them,’ he said.

‘Will the tactic slow them enough, do you think?’ Numeon glanced at the screen that showed the estimated positions of the approaching fleet.

‘Enough for what?’ Vaughn asked. ‘To meet our reinforcements or our new enemies?’

‘Either,’ said Numeon.

‘Make sure it does,’ Vaughn said. ‘I will know the truth, first captain. If I have to tear ork throats out with my teeth, I will know the truth.’

With T’kell at his side, Vulkan walked down the hall towards the starboard launch bay of the *Flamewrought*. He had sought out the Forgemaster in his quarters, where T’kell had been preparing for embarkation, and told him that he would be the pilot of the great engine. Now they were making their way to where the machine waited.

‘Thank you, lord primarch, for this honour,’ said the Forgemaster.

‘You have earned it. You know the vehicle better than anyone else in the Legion.’

‘Not anyone, lord primarch.’

‘I meant exactly what I said. It would be tactically wrong for me to assign anyone else as pilot. Nor do I wish to.’

T’kell bowed his head. ‘Then, with thanks, I will pilot this piece of the Eighteenth Legion’s history.’

Vulkan placed a hand on T’kell’s shoulder. ‘You will pilot it into our Legion’s future.’

The launch bay of the *Flamewrought* had been modified to accommodate the huge vehicle. One of the bulkheads had been opened up so the machine’s great length could fit into a single, gargantuan chamber. Vulkan stood on a dais beside the open hatch in the forward section of the weapon and addressed the serried ranks of legionaries. His voice needed no amplification, and it boomed against the distant walls of the bay.

‘My sons,’ he said, ‘when I had this machine brought from Mars to Nocturne, I told you of the modifications we needed, of the improvements that were to be made. Your labours have made me proud. Though the function of the machine needs no explanation, I did not tell you then of its provenance or of its history. I will tell you now, because it is important to mark that we begin a new chapter in the Legion’s history but not a new book. There is continuity from the past to the future of the Eighteenth, and we find that continuity in this great engine, for this is the Termite *Spear of Fire*.

‘You are aware, I know, of the Terran Eighteenth’s reputation. How its

legionaries appear to seek out the most desperate of battles. Perhaps they do. And perhaps that is as things should be. Are we not made to withstand that which no others could? We are the ones who, when all else have fallen, will stand and declare, *This far, no further. Not one more step*.

'So it was when the Eighteenth fought by the side of the Emperor on Terra, using this machine and others of its kind. With the Termites, they stormed the underground Tempest Galleries of the Ethnarchy of the Caucasus Wastes. They broke through what had seemed impenetrable, and when, on the surface, all but the Emperor had deemed the Eighteenth lost, its warriors returned in triumph, bursting through a volcano near the city of Klostzatz.

'The battleship that proudly bore the name of that city, the name that represented this victory, died attempting to shatter another impenetrable barrier. Now we will complete that task. The Termite will grind through the defences of a foe once more. But now, with your work and the actions of our forges on Nocturne, this ship will do so much more. The technology of Terra is united to the craftwork of Nocturne, and look at this wonder, my sons! There is no fortress that can stand before this, not on any world. Think of the cataclysmic might we have created, now that the Termite can also travel through the void. Think what it means that before us is a boarding torpedo that can carry a thousand warriors.

'Think what we will do to the enemy.

'Do you hear me, my sons?'

'*We hear you, lord primarch!*'

'Then let us go. Let me hear in your march the beat of the great hammer of the Eighteenth Legion. Let me hear the sounds of its forge.'

As the chosen thousand boarded the *Spear of Fire*, Vulkan's ships closed with the ork swarm. The fleet was no larger than the one the XVIII had brought to defend the Taras Division more than a year ago, but these ships were newly launched from the yards of Mars and they too had been reworked by the Forgemasters of Nocturne. They were fresh to battle, and they came upon a surprised enemy. Following Vulkan's plan, the fleet came at the orks not as a spear to drive into the heart of the enemy, but as an oblique hammer blow. The greenskin ships reacted as the first torpedoes fell upon them, peeling away from Antaeum to attack the new threat. And so the first stage of Vulkan's strategy began to bear fruit, as the landings on Antaeum diminished.

The fleet drew nearer the swarm and the angle of its approach became even more pronounced, and now the ships had their flanks to the greenskins. A wide barrage struck the orks. The near orbit of the planet burst with explosions, and scores of ships were destroyed. The ork swarm broke away

from the world like a cloud of furious wasps and gave chase as the XVIII's ships appeared to overshoot Antaeum, then begin to turn away.

The Legion's fleet accelerated, putting distance between it and the orks, getting the space it needed to turn around and attack again.

At the moment of the *Flamewrought*'s closest approach to Antaeum, just before it began its turn, the Termite dropped from its hull and sped towards the attack moon. Its cylindrical hull was eight hundred metres long. In appearance, it was forged from wrought iron that was black as coal, the engravings on its surface limned with bronze and gold. Its walls were metres thick, composite plates of adamantium and ceramite. The engines for void navigation that had been added on Nocturne formed a ring around its aft section, surrounding the primary ground-propulsion system. Shielded sensors ran the length of the windowless hull, feeding knowledge of the Termite's surroundings to the pilot's compartment, which was just aft of the drill head. The chromed adamantium cone was immense, larger at its base than a Stormbird and twice as long.

At the same time that the *Spear of Fire* left its berth, so did a stream of boarding torpedoes, making for their own targets.

Vulkan stood in the chamber behind Forgemaster T'kell's pilot's throne aboard the *Spear of Fire*. He hunched forwards to keep his head below the curved roof. From this position, he could see all the pict screens at a glance. They were arranged in a horseshoe formation around the throne, though T'kell's focus was on the large screen before him, which displayed the view ahead of the Termite.

Vulkan tracked the movements of the fleets. The barrage was having the desired effect. The orks in their anger were abandoning the attack moon. The only threat they saw was the fleet. Vulkan had calculated the *Spear of Fire*'s path carefully. It ran parallel to the bombardment. He was counting on the orks dismissing the Termite as yet another projectile. They showed little interest in trying to intercept torpedoes and cannon shells. Defence seemed to be an unknown concept to the greenskins. All they knew was to attack, and so their ships went after the sources of the projectiles, rather than the projectiles themselves.

The *Spear of Fire* flew through the cloud of ork vessels.

'Those are not ships,' T'kell muttered. 'They are detritus.' He spoke with the anger of the offended craftsman.

Vulkan did not blame him. Every ship that appeared on the pict screens defied any concept of void-worthiness. Their shapes turned the hololithic diagrams into scrawls. Some of the ships had once been human, while others

included portions of recognisable craft.

‘I cannot even call them diseased,’ said T’kell.

‘No,’ Vulkan agreed. ‘That would imply they were once whole.’

The ships were wreckage that flew, components hurled together with no thought, no logic. There was no uniformity to any of them.

‘They are a perversion of craft,’ T’kell said.

‘They are the products of brute chance. These are merely the ones that function. Who knows how many thousands never left the ground.’

T’kell feathered the controls, using the engines only when he absolutely had to, preserving the illusion of an outsized torpedo. Then the *Spear of Fire* came through the swarm, and the way was clear to the attack moon.

The two fleets came within range of each other, and Vulkan watched as the screens coldly relayed the impact of large-scale void war.

The leading edge of the ork horde came apart, ships disappearing into fireballs, exploding into storms of shrapnel. The orks flew so close together that the death of a single vessel led to chain reactions. Vulkan’s fleet came at the orks and curved again, broadsiding the enemy, then turning away.

The *Flamewrought* and its escorts began the manoeuvre long before the orks came anywhere close to their positions. The battleship was so massive, its momentum so great, that its turning circle was tens of thousands of kilometres wide. The change in direction had to begin before it was needed. This was why Vulkan had rehearsed the strategies of the battle in detail with Och’hi. He had seen the unhappy look on the shipmaster’s face as Vulkan unfolded the pattern to him in the primarch’s quarters.

‘You are displeased,’ Vulkan had said.

‘The extraction strategy is daring, lord primarch, and we will do you proud. But with respect, the tactics until then feel like a series of retreats.’

‘It is quite the opposite. Antaeum is the ground we seek to hold.’

‘But we are not yet on it,’ said Och’hi.

‘We are,’ Vulkan had told him. ‘The Eighteenth is on Antaeum, fighting desperately, and this world is the line that protects the rest of the Taras System. You will draw the orks away from Antaeum. This will relieve your brothers on the ground and clear the path for us. This is not a retreat. It is an advance. The orks will be losing ground when they pursue. They will not know it, but it is they who will be relinquishing territory.’

Now, on the Termite, the pict screen readouts could not convey the majesty of the *Flamewrought*, but Vulkan could picture it in his mind’s eye. He hoped Och’hi could see what he was forging. This tactic was no blunt blade of war. It was finely crafted. It was worthy of pride.

The Imperial ships turned slowly, but their engines were far more powerful

than the orks', and as they accelerated once more, they put distance again between themselves and the enemy. Then they turned to port, delivering another broadside, and then they were face-on.

The orks were firing constantly, turning the void white with the intensity of their weapons. On the pict screens, the war frozen into still images as the data updated, Vulkan saw the flare of void shields. Runes changed second by second, breaking the battle down to vectors and damage estimates.

'*We are holding, lord primarch,*' Och'hi voxed. '*We will keep them here.*'

'And we will stab at their heart,' said Vulkan.

The attack moon drew closer. The target site was the impact of the *Klostzatz*. Though the battleship had failed, the shell of the ork base would still be weakened where the vessel had hit, and to break open the crust at that site would pay tribute to the loss and the bravery of the *Klostzatz*'s final sacrifice.

Not all the ork ships had left to pursue the XVIII's fleet. Small transports were continuing to land xenos troops on Antaeum. As the larger ships were emptied of their complement of infantry, they left orbit to join in the void war.

'No landings from the attack moon,' Vulkan commented.

'Is that suggestive?' T'kell asked.

'Unless its forces are already on the planet, then the full strength is still in the greenskin base, and there is a much greater invasion to come.'

'There will be plenty to welcome us, then,' said T'kell.

'Indeed,' Vulkan said. 'And that many more to be destroyed.'

An ork ship that had finished unloading now whipped around the attack moon on its way towards the fleets. Its trajectory brought it in line with the Termite. Vulkan eyed its path carefully, and when the ork vessel changed its route slightly, he said, 'They have seen us.'

The ork ship was coming directly at the machine.

The Termite was armed, but its lascannons and twin-linked heavy bolters, which would be devastating against infantry and armour on the ground, were futile against a void ship.

'I can try to evade,' said T'kell.

'No. Take us through that ship.'

The Forgemaster grinned. 'With pleasure, lord primarch.'

T'kell engaged the Termite's drill head. A rapid vibration ran through the bulkheads and the deck. It set Vulkan's teeth on edge, but it was also a satisfying sound. It was powerful. It drew from the entire strength and length and mass of the Termite. It was not just the spin of the drill head that would strike the enemy. It was all the momentum of the Termite, its monstrous totality – just as it was not the hammer itself that would crush an enemy, but the force of the blow.

The ork ship neared, its cannons firing madly. Shells smacked against the hull of the Termite, shaking it violently.

‘These glancing blows will mar our fine artwork,’ said T’kell. ‘They insult us.’

‘Then return the insult in full,’ Vulkan said.

The *Spear of Fire* ploughed into the bow of the enemy ship. The pict screens struggled to keep up with the flood of updates from the sensors. A juddering series of still images showed Vulkan the death of the ork vessel. They were static-riven yet vivid impressions of rent metal and explosions. The vibrations of the hull grew more violent as it passed through the ship, tearing it open as a hunter’s blade guts the belly of a leo’nid. The vessel peeled back until its ragged halves fell away, bleeding bodies and gases into the frozen void.

The Termite came out the other end, the ork ship slowly disintegrating in its wake.

‘We have called attention to ourselves,’ said T’kell.

There were other ships coming for them now.

On the central pict screen above the pilot’s controls, the target area of the attack moon became more and more defined. The ork ships came from both sides of the huge base, firing continuously. There was no point in disguise now, and T’kell used the engines to move the Termite back and forth. The aim of the greenskins was so rushed, so wild, that his efforts were enough to weave the ship through the web of shells, and the ork vessels began to destroy each other with their own crossfire.

Ram ships appeared to port and starboard. Even if they didn’t crack the Termite’s hull, their impact would be enough to knock it from its course. T’kell blasted the engines, forcing the last bit of speed he could from the *Spear of Fire*, racing the ram ships to the surface. The shattered remains of the *Klostzatz* loomed closer, still captures cascading across the pict screen with the speed of a bolter firing at full burst. The sight of the wreckage grieved Vulkan. He saluted the courage of the crew who had fought to the last extremity, but he felt their loss too. He believed that he and the sons of Nocturne had arrived in time to save the Terran XVIII. Even so, his thoughts were now for all those who had died in the battle for the Taras Division. For them, the fleet from Nocturne had come far too late.

The ram ships angled in, their courses beyond reckless.

‘Those vessels have doomed themselves,’ T’kell said, appalled. He had seen every manner of sadistic ferocity in the battles to free Nocturne from the Dusk Wraiths, but this was his first encounter with the relentless, mindless savagery of the orks. ‘Do they think so little of their own lives?’

‘They do not think in those terms,’ said Vulkan. ‘It has not occurred to them

that they will die. Their only goal is our destruction. This is what makes them so dangerous. This is why they must be exterminated.’

As he spoke, Vulkan’s eyes flicked from screen to screen, estimating speed and trajectories. The race was too close to call.

The ruins of the *Klostzatz* became a skeleton. The remains of the great hull reached up from the surface of the attack moon, jagged, gnarled, clutching, stabbing. The Termite descended into the abstraction of metal kilometres high. The ram ships came after it, and the fire from the other ork ships converged into a blistering attack. The barrage took out one of the pursuing vessels. Its engines exploded and it spun, a battering ram hundreds of metres long, careening in a death spiral, colliding with the sky-reaching shards of the *Klostzatz*.

Now pict screens on all sides of the pilot’s compartment showed nothing but the wreckage of the great ship. The Termite descended through the cold remains of an immense pyre. Vulkan saw nothing that resembled a ship any longer. There was only a torn vastness, a twisted metal cry of pride and despair.

The second ram ship hammered its way through the ruined plate. The impact did not stop the ship, but did slow it. The Termite gained a few more seconds in the race. The drill head accelerated to full speed, the hull trembling and whining with its energy.

‘We stab at thee,’ Vulkan growled at the ork planetoid.

Then came the impact of a sword striking home. The Termite roared as its spinning head ground through the crust of the base.

Behind it came another roar, the apocalyptic thunder of the ram ship hitting with the force of a meteor.

FIVE

TWO DESCENTS / THE SIGN OF FATE / SEIZED

Struggle is eternal. We are forever subject to the tempering of the forge. It shapes us until our nature and our purpose align.

– Vulkan, *Considerations of Purpose*

Numeon made his way across the roofs of the modules that made up the fortress.

The roofs were a cramped series of gun platforms with a landing platform at the centre for the gunships. There was barely room to accommodate the firepower and the recoil of the big cannons. This was intentional. The modular units of the stronghold were designed to be impregnable. They were components that would only appear in the midst of warzones. They would become fortresses whose very existence meant they were under siege. There was no time, in the fury of battle, to make the walls indestructible, so the bases were made to be unapproachable.

Artellus Numeon moved across the roofs to the southern rampart. On either side of him, Earthshaker cannons pounded away at the greenskins. There were four of the huge guns on this wall. Their fire was staggered so there was never a pause in the shelling, just a steady *boom, boom, boom, boom* of monstrous loads of high explosive. They churned the cooling lava of the plain, hurling rock and bodies high into the air, creating a barrier of fire and dust between the enemy and the fortress. Behind Numeon, raised lascannon turrets swept back and forth, stitching the terrain with searing heat. In between the cannons, legionaries manned heavy bolter positions. And then there was the solid line

of warriors. Even with their numbers so reduced, they could put up an unbroken defence along the limited space of the walls.

Almost all firepower was aimed at the south. The orks could not approach upslope from the north. A few guns concentrating on the east and west sides were enough to hold the orks back there. The near continuous flow of lava in those directions acted as moat and crematory against the enemy, but the bridges of cooling rock were enough to allow the troops and armour to make their way from the Cauldron down the slopes to strike the enemy's flank.

The attacks killed the orks in their thousands. The earlier lava flood had reduced the army on the plains by more than half. But it was still huge, and the tide pushed forwards. The brutes climbed over the bodies of their dead, unwavering in their savage need to clash with the legionaries.

Numeon looked down the side of the wall. Here, as on the other ramparts, he saw the damage inflicted by the eruptions. The adamantine and ferrocrete walls were scorched. Their foundations were crumpled. They seemed to have been gnawed by a monstrous scavenger. He glanced back at the peak of the volcano and the ash clouds billowing from the crater. Every so often, another flow of molten rock streamed down the slope. So far, there had not been a third major eruption, and the lava ran mainly over earlier, cooled rock. The ongoing damage to the Cauldron was, for the moment, limited. The upheavals had ruined enough of the landing platforms that the surviving Thunderhawks and Stormbirds could only land one at a time to refuel. As a result, the aerial attacks on the orks were perpetual. But the stores of fuel and ammunition were not infinite. From every angle that Numeon considered the battle, he saw the end rushing near.

Orasus nodded in greeting to Numeon. He did not pause in his bolter fire. 'Where do we stand, first captain?' he asked.

'Against the mountain?' said Numeon. 'That depends on its caprices. If it chooses, it can sweep us away.'

'It is an impatient mountain,' Orasus said. 'I do not think it will wait much longer.'

'Let us will it to patience. The reinforcements are coming.'

'Do they plan to be here within hours?'

'We know the answer to that question, at least,' Numeon said. 'They cannot be. The true question is whether we can last until they do arrive.' He added his own bolter to the barrage. Orks fell every time he pulled the trigger. It was like firing into the sea. The waves kept coming. The orks moved inexorably up the volcanic cone. 'We need more time,' he muttered.

'It's a shame we can't survive another eruption,' said Orasus. 'They tend to keep the greenskins at bay for a while.'

Numeon frowned. He looked down the mountain slope, at the fissures and gorges, at the patterns of lava. He noted the jets of steam from the smaller vents in the lower reaches. The deck under his feet shook from the cannon fire, but continuous microquakes also made it heave up and down. ‘I wonder,’ he said. ‘Maybe this volcano can still be our ally.’ He voxed Xerexenia. ‘Are the sensors reading the mountain still intact?’

‘*Some of them are. An unsatisfactory number,*’ she replied.

‘Can you get a reading of weak points or spikes of pressure on the south face, directly below the Cauldron?’

‘*There are many, of varying degrees. What do you seek, first captain?*’

‘Are there any points where we might use seismic charges to unleash a lava flow between ourselves and the orks?’

Xerexenia chattered in binaric. Then she said, ‘*There is a point at which that may be possible. Its position is approximately two-thirds of the distance between our location and the enemy’s front line. There is a crevasse leading towards a magma chamber. It may be possible to open the chamber.*’

‘Show me where it is,’ Numeon said.

‘*I have no data to suggest the consequences of this action,*’ said Xerexenia. ‘*Extrication from the crevasse, in the event of an eruption, may not be possible.*’

‘I would expect nothing else,’ said Numeon.

A few seconds later, he received the data stream from the tech-priest. An overlay on his retinal lenses appeared, showing him the position of the crevasse. From this distance, it was merely one dark patch among others in a storm of grey and fire. ‘Gunnery control,’ he voxed, ‘I’m sending you new coordinates. Is the target a viable one for the Earthshakers? I want to crack that crevasse open.’

After a moment, Sergeant Tusculan, commanding the downslope artillery, said, ‘*The angle is wrong, first captain. We can damage the surface, but our shells will come in almost parallel to the slope.*’

Orasus paused long enough to reload his bolter. His helmet turned Numeon’s way. ‘You are planning something, first captain,’ he said.

‘I am,’ said Numeon. He had hoped artillery fire could have at least partly opened the way to their goal, but it was not to be. He found himself starting to smile. Of course the cannons could not help. That would have been too easy. That would have been contrary to the fate and the character of his Legion. The more he thought about the lethal impossibility of what he was about to attempt, the wider his grin became.

Below, the orks were now only a few hundred metres from the target. Their advance was slow but inexorable. The tide was rising.

Numeon voxed Manius Silva, who was leading the assault on the eastern flank. The flares of shell blasts were brighter and closer in that direction than they were to the west. ‘Is there any way you can cut across the enemy south of the gates?’ he asked.

‘*Given time, perhaps,*’ said Silva. ‘*We are making some progress against them, but it is slow, and there are more of the greenskins closing in from the south. This is a holding action, brother.*’

‘I know it. I am going to try to gain us more time. If contact with me is lost, you have command, Manius.’

‘*It is not like you to be foolhardy, Artellus.*’

‘It is not like me to wait behind the lines for the inevitable, either.’

And the orks *were* coming. They would take the walls of the Cauldron, and the time Vaughn’s strategy had bought for the Legion was disappearing. It was time to attempt something just as drastic. ‘What I have in mind, I will not have anyone risk in my stead,’ he told Manius. *Not*, he thought, *with the end so near at hand.*

‘*I understand,*’ said Manius, and it was clear that he did.

Numeon turned to the legionaries who lined the wall beside him. Next to Orasus were three others who had all served, at one time or another, in squads commanded by Numeon before his elevation to first captain. That they were present now seemed fitting. He was tempted to credit a fate in which he did not believe. ‘We have little time,’ Numeon declared. ‘Orasus, Blasius, Saluran and Caelius,’ he said, ‘you are my squad.’ The casualties had been so high, there were no squads that had been left intact. Every formation was a new one.

‘Yes, first captain,’ said Orasus. ‘Where are we going?’

‘Downslope,’ Numeon said.

Orasus gave a short bark of grim laughter. ‘Into the fire.’

‘That is truer than you know.’

Numeon voxed his orders to the Cauldron’s arsenal as he and his squad descended from the roof. Wearied human serfs met them with seismic charges at the main entrance. As exhausted as the Legiones Astartes were, the mortals were at the very end of their endurance. It was, Numeon thought, a testament to their loyalty that they were still able to function at all. Their faces were grey, their cheeks hollow, their eyes burned-out coals. They looked too exhausted to die.

Numeon watched the squad make final preparations. They were all tactical legionaries. Orasus was the eldest of the four, cut from the same rough material as Numeon. Saluran was phlegmatic, the scars he had earned fighting at Numeon’s side a map of honour on his face. Caelius was an observer of the

bleak humour of war, while Blasius was taciturn but relentless. They had all fought together before. In the eyes of every one of them, Numeon saw the knowledge that this time could well be their last. But they had picked up on his eagerness, and shared it.

‘Maintain constant fire on the target until our arrival,’ Numeon voxed Tusculan. ‘Then fire downslope from there. Keep the orks away from the crevasse as long as you can.’

‘*So ordered, first captain.*’ Tusculan sounded as eager as Numeon’s squad. They all saw the madness in what they were doing. They also saw that there was no choice, and they were grateful for it.

If this became the final action of the XVIII Legion, it would be a fitting one.

The squad charged out of the Cauldron. The blocky fortress briefly sheltered them from the wind and the ash. They descended further, and the winds tried to yank them off the mountain face. Ash ticked like skeletal fingers against their armour.

They moved down towards the tumult of cannon fire. The ground heaved so violently from the shells of the Earthshakers, it seemed the squad’s mission should be unnecessary. It was impossible that the mountain could survive such a pounding. Its entire base should split open, the cone collapsing into the flood of glowing rock.

Numeon set a fast pace, leaping and sliding down the steep slope. For all the fury of the artillery barrage, the orks were still making headway. Tusculan was keeping them away from the target, but they were beginning to encroach on either side. Wherever there was the slightest decrease in shelling, the orks surged forwards.

‘Did the tech-priest say how many charges we would need?’ Blasius asked.

‘No,’ said Numeon, ‘and she is more displeased than I am. For her, the most grievous casualty of war is precision.’

Down. Faster yet. Five legionaries hurtling towards a vortex of destruction, and Numeon’s grin was back. There was laughter on the vox from one of the others, and he knew they were sharing in his barbed pleasure.

‘This is no retreat, brothers,’ he said. ‘We have our advance at last!’

‘We come not just to take ground, but to destroy it,’ said Saluran, fully in the mad spirit of the charge.

The crevasse was close, but still invisible to the naked eye. The explosions and the storm concealed it. Numeon’s auto-senses pointed him to a position less than a hundred metres away, and now they were almost in the midst of the Cauldron’s barrage.

‘March the shells downhill, Sergeant Tusculan,’ Numeon voxed. ‘We are there.’

He didn’t wait for the guns to change their aim. He could see no orks in the centre of this hell, and the greenskins would be even more blind. If his squad could drop into the crevasse without being seen, they would gain that much more of an advantage.

We have earned that small good fortune, he thought. *That can’t be too much to ask.*

Numeon ran down between two jagged piles of rock, scree sliding under his boots. Buffeted by the shock waves of the shelling, he was almost on top of the crevasse before he could see it. It was less than three metres wide and perhaps fifteen metres long. The cannons had scooped out chunks of the mountainside all around it. A crater cut across the upper portion of the cleft. Numeon could not see how far the drop was, but there was no choice, and he jumped.

The fissure narrowed quickly. Numeon scraped down the sides and landed with a violent crack on a ledge almost six metres down. The others followed. The darkness of the crevasse was lit fitfully by the strobing of explosions outside. The ash and dust drifted in with none of the force of the storm. The interior of the fissure felt strangely calm, the thunder of the war at a sudden remove, even though they had barely left it behind.

After the initial drop, the crevasse wound back and forth through the rock. Numeon nodded to his legionaries and they descended. It was slower going now. Each drop was barely more than the height of a man before the angle would change again.

Then savage roaring came from above.

‘They saw us,’ said Orasus.

‘Of course they did,’ said Numeon. Below, the fissure narrowed even more. There was not enough room to get through. ‘And we are slowing down.’

Caelius and Saluran raised their bolters while Numeon and Orasus prepared demolition charges. Blasius sent up quick bursts of burning promethium from his flamer.

‘Do please try not to collapse the mountain on us, first captain,’ said Caelius.

‘That would not be my first choice of outcome,’ Numeon said. He shone his helm light down. The tight confines extended a metre or so, then opened up again.

Bolter fire hammered upwards, deafening in the confined space of the crevasse. Greenskin blood and shattered remains fell among the squad. Retaliatory fire ricocheted wildly, bouncing harmlessly off the legionaries’ armour. The roaring of the orks increased to a frenzy.

Numeon and Orasus rose from their crouches. ‘We’re ready,’ Numeon said, and the squad scrambled back up the crevasse.

The ascent was hard, even to gain a few metres and move around a bend in the rock, away from the melta charges.

‘We aren’t getting back out, are we?’ Orasus sounded more curious than concerned.

‘What matters is that we bring the fire,’ Numeon answered. He pulled the trigger on the detonator and the explosives went off.

The burning light reached up through the crevasse, turning the darkness a hard silver. It illuminated the orks struggling down towards the squad. Bolter fire tore the beasts apart in a bottleneck. Corpses fell and jammed together. The orks were going to have to cut through their dead to reach the Space Marines.

The walls of the crevasse shook and Numeon heard the hiss and crack of rock melting and falling below. He dropped back down. The melta bombs had created a gap leading into a wider portion of the crevasse. The walls were more than fifteen metres apart here, and the cavern extended for hundreds of metres in both directions from the access point. The drop was sheer, but there were just enough cracks and fissures in the wall to give the legionaries hand and footholds. The temperature climbed as they descended, a foretaste, Numeon hoped, of what he planned to unleash.

Whenever possible, the squad fired back up. The legionaries had descended thirty metres when the greenskins broke past the bottleneck. A dozen of the brutes immediately plummeted, howling, through the dark. A few paused and tried to shoot at the squad with crude guns. They did no more than chip the stone, then their fellows, pushing from behind, knocked them from their purchase and they too fell to their deaths. It was another few minutes before the creatures managed to understand that they had to climb down.

The bottom of the shaft came into view. Numeon jumped from half a dozen metres up. The floor he landed on was sloped with the shape of the mountain, and there was a definite bulge in the centre.

‘Do you have our position?’ Numeon voxed Xerexenia.

‘*I am receiving telemetry from your armour*.’

‘Are we at the dome of the magma chamber?’

‘*Positions are approximate. I cannot say with certainty*.’

‘Estimate,’ said Numeon.

‘*Can you go any further?*’

‘No. The fissure ends here.’

‘*Then there is a strong likelihood you have reached the best position possible.*’

That sounded like an equivocation to Numeon, but given the limited data, he knew this would be as definite an answer as the tech-priest was willing to

give him.

‘We place the charges here,’ Numeon told the squad.

‘All of them?’ Orasus asked.

Numeon thought for a moment. He did not know how thick the dome was. He did not want to risk spreading the force of the seismic charges too thinly. ‘We start in the centre,’ he said. ‘One charge. We hit this point until we break through.’

Saluran ran forwards to prepare his seismic charge.

The orks were now swarming down the walls. Some were still falling. The squad had to keep ducking out of the way of the bodies hurtling down to break themselves against the jagged floor of the crevasse. Brutes were leaping from the wall in their frenzy to get into battle. Numeon and his legionaries raked the cliffs with bolter fire, clearing the lower reaches of greenskins. But there were hundreds now inside the cavern, and the flood was just beginning.

‘Ready,’ said Saluran.

‘East wall,’ Numeon said, and the squad ran for the cliff. It was the one they had descended, and knew they could climb again if they had to.

Or if they had the chance.

A massive ork jumped from six metres up and landed beside Numeon as he reached the wall. He grabbed his gladius from his belt and plunged the blade through the greenskin’s left eye and into its brain before it had finished roaring its challenge.

The seismic charge went off, blasting a crater in the centre of the dome. A wall of dust roared upwards and filled the cavern, choking the air. The crevasse trembled. Orks fell from the walls in a cataract of xenos flesh. Fissures raced up the cliffs, shearing off slabs of rock. The squad pressed close to the weak shelter of the wall, weathering the impact of the smaller shards, ducking away from the heavier rubble. A chunk of basalt the size of a Rhino missed Numeon by inches. It slammed into the floor, crushing orks.

The tremors knocked greenskins off their feet, yet they tried to attack rather than avoid the hail of rock. They failed and they died, but there were so many now that the mass of bodies on the floor of the cavern was breaking the fall of others, and for every ork killed, three more landed.

The cavern was still shaking, but the rock fall had diminished when Numeon led a charge through the dust towards the crater. The surface of the dome had become jaggedly uneven, fractures overlapping with each other and sharp ridges of rock thrusting up between the rubble and the bodies of orks. The crater was deep and riven by still-deeper fissures. The dome felt to Numeon like the shell of an egg, webbed by cracks but still holding together. For all the damage the seismic charge had wrought, there was a maddening stillness

to the dome as the tremors eased. It was not going to die easily. Numeon had a vision of his squad futilely trying to blast through hundreds of metres of rock. That degree of barrier was impossible, yet it seemed in keeping with Antaeum's determination to annihilate the XVIII Legion.

'This planet refuses to cooperate,' Caelius said, echoing Numeon's thoughts as they charged into the crater.

The orks followed, the horde spilling over the lip of the depression on all sides. Caelius moved down to the centre, stone giving way beneath his feet, to place his seismic charge while Numeon and the others gave him cover. The squad formed a square around their kneeling brother. Blasius unleashed the full force of his flamer, creating a continuous stream of fire, one flood against another. Numeon gunned down greenskin after greenskin, but the orks only became more numerous, as if far above, the surface had cracked open to pour the entire army into the crevasse. Within seconds, he was slicing throats and gutting bellies with his gladius while firing steady bursts with his bolter at point-blank range.

'It's done!' Caelius shouted. He jumped up and started shooting too, the detonator in his other hand. The seismic charge looked like a crouching insect in the crater, a cylinder surrounded by angled legs, the shaped explosive ready to blast through the ground.

The orks pressed in so tightly that they became a single, slavering, howling mass. They ran and leapt into the crater, piling up against one another, surrounding the squad. Claws, tusks and misshapen blades smashed against the Space Marines. The squad was a tight knot of ceramite at the centre of the vortex of savage muscle.

'Is the charge secure?' Numeon shouted.

'As secure as it can be,' said Caelius. 'It won't take them more than a few seconds to uproot it.'

'We can use those seconds. Blasius,' he ordered, 'you take the lead. Squad, frag grenades ahead of the flames.'

The legionaries formed up behind Blasius. They marched into the fire as he incinerated the orks before him. They hurled their grenades beyond the promethium. The orks were packed in so tightly that they muffled the blast. The attack created just enough give through the flesh to push forwards. The legionaries hurled themselves against the greenskins with gun and flame and blade, brute force against brute force. In the few seconds available, they fought their way several metres up the bowl of the crater. The orks poured into the gap behind them. Numeon could barely move now to swing his blade. He fired his bolter at an angle, the shells streaming just past Blasius' shoulder, punching a bit more space, gaining the squad another metre up the slope,

away from the seismic charge.

'This is futile!' Saluran growled.

'We have to try,' Orasus shouted back.

If the explosive was enough and it broke through the dome to the magma chamber, it would be worth their lives for the time it might gain the rest of the Legion. But if the charge was not enough and another was needed, to die now, Numeon thought, would be the true futility.

'They're attacking the charge!' Caelius warned.

The five Space Marines were less than halfway up the bowl of the depression. *Let this be enough*, Numeon thought. 'Detonate!' he commanded, and he embraced the desperation of the moment. '*Do it now!*'

The world erupted.

The death of the ram ship chased the *Spear of Fire* through the tunnel it was boring into the crust of the attack moon. Exploding gas surrounded the vehicle and the pict screens showed nothing but the holocaust. The Termite trembled with the grind of its advance, and klaxons sounded heat warnings.

In the pilot's throne, T'kell was almost motionless, at one with the machine. He had urged the engines to greater speed through the void, and now he was focused on the fury of the drill head and the traction of the Termite's land-based propulsion.

Blinded by the fire, the pict screens did not show the transition from void ship to land destroyer, but Vulkan felt it. The flank engines ceased firing. They withdrew into the hull and tank treads emerged on all sides in their place. They pushed against the walls of the Termite's shaft and drove it forwards.

The fires dissipated, revealing the ram ship's sacrifice to be meaningless. Now the pict screens showed the tunnel the Termite was carving through rock and metal. For several long heartbeats, the vehicle burrowed through the monotony of the crust, an agglomeration of plate and stone, destroyed ship and planetoid slammed together into a shield as crude as its brutal density made it effective. Then, with a crunch and a disorienting lurch, the *Spear of Fire* was through the crust and into the body of the monster.

This region of the interior of the attack moon was hardly less dense than the crust. It was a maze of tunnels and constructs, a collision of the nonsensical work of the orks and the battered wreckage of the ships they had salvaged and welded into the massiveness that was their base. It was a madman's idea of a hive, a visual cacophony of scrapyard, ruin and frenzied construction. The gravity here was incoherent. Inside the *Spear of Fire*, Vulkan felt himself pulled in different directions from moment to moment, as if the artificial

gravity generators of dozens of ships were all functioning at once and at cross purposes. Orks streamed down the tunnels and corridors towards the huge intruder. They swarmed down scaffolding and the exposed skeletal frameworks of hulls. As the Termite tore through the attack moon, the pict screens picked up greenskin faces contorted in savage rage and disbelief. An enemy had come to them and had brought destruction, and this was incomprehensible. At the same time, the excitement of war was upon them. They did not have to descend to the planet to fight.

I have brought you the gift of battle, Vulkan thought. *It will not please you.*

From all sides, the orks charged the Termite. They appeared upright and upside down and sideways, depending on the zone of gravity through which they ran. The *Spear of Fire* jerked violently, pulled and pushed by the contradictory forces, but T'kell held it true to its course and it plunged deeper and deeper, heading for the distant heart of the attack moon.

And now the Termite's weaponry came into its own. Legionaries manned the squat lascannon and storm bolter turrets that hunkered, almost flat against the hull, between the treads. The Termite unleashed a three hundred and sixty-degree hail of fire. Vulkan took the storm bolter controls in the pilot's compartment. He kept an eye on the pict screens, swinging the turret in whatever direction he saw a large concentration of greenskins.

Here and there the orks managed to fire their own primitive turrets at the Termite as it tore past, but their primary assault was as it always was, and always had been, with the greenskins – monstrous waves of bodies throwing themselves at their enemy, whether they could hope to do it any harm or not.

They landed in front of the drill head and disappeared into a green mist. They landed on the Termite, already dead, burned and mangled by the turrets. But always there were more. That, Vulkan thought, was the single overriding truth when it came to orks. As the floodgates opened from every corridor, they jumped at the vehicle, some managing to stay on the hull briefly before being scraped off by the stream of rubble or the sides of the shaft the *Spear of Fire* was boring through stone and metal. They hacked at the turrets and hatches with crude las-cutters. They stuck explosives to the sides. Their blows were futile vibrations against the impregnable plating of the Termite.

The machine blasted through walls and floors. It churned through the nonsensical space of the orks, and the structure of the attack moon became less dense as the Termite went deeper. The chambers through which it stormed were greater, and they held more orks. Scores had been attacking the Termite every second. Now there were hundreds. The front of the machine became a continuous spray of green as the horde was caught by the drill head.

'The xenos have not befouled the machinery yet,' T'kell said. 'We are

making good time.’

‘Is our distance to target becoming more clear?’ Vulkan asked.

‘It is beginning to, lord primarch. We are getting useful readings on the base’s density and construction.’

At last the Termite passed into a region of solid rock, and the walls of the shaft swept the hull clean of orks. Vulkan turned from the turret to the screens. The readouts were the attack moon speaking to him. It unveiled its secrets. It was an unnatural world, but it was still a world, and he could read it as he could any planet, moon or asteroid. No ground could conceal its truths from him.

‘We need to go deeper yet,’ Vulkan said. ‘The blasts must come from close to the core to have enough pressure to destroy this base.’ He watched the inflow of data a few seconds longer, reading the attack moon’s density, seeing its cracks and weaknesses, then opened a vox-channel to Sho’mar and Kal’ma. ‘I have the measure of this base’s strength,’ he told the Praetors. ‘When our journey to the core ends, the seismic charges will need to be placed on a radius at least two thousand metres from my position.’

‘*Understood, lord primarch,*’ the Praetors responded.

‘For a species so brutish, their work is resilient,’ said T’kell.

‘Nothing they build should function at all,’ said Vulkan. ‘But you are right. When they have constructed something that does not immediately destroy itself, it has the same strength as its creators.’

The *Spear of Fire* broke through a roof and plunged into a chamber filled with tens of thousands of orks. They converged on the vehicle’s point of impact and jumped onto the hull.

The tide covered the machine.

The Termite ploughed through a sludge of green flesh, sliding back and forth over the remains of orks that were crushed beneath its treads, liquefied by the drill head, burned and blasted into nothing by the turrets. They were turning into a literal wave, and the Termite was not designed for an ocean. The treads spun in muscle and gristle, struggling to find a purchase. The vehicle slowed, the drill turning fruitlessly in the air as T’kell struggled to reach the next wall. The orks pressed in, wading through the filth of the dead. The turrets blasted them away as fast as they charged, and as fast as they were killed, more orks arrived.

Vulkan opened the hatch from the pilot’s compartment and leapt out onto the hull of the *Spear of Fire*. He held two weapons of his own forging. One was a massive plasma pistol, *Anvil’s Light*, and it contained the fury of a sun. The other was *Nightforged*, a powerblade nearly as long as a mortal was tall. The

iron of its blade was so dense and so dark, it glimmered midnight blue. A brighter, searing azure energy crackled down its length, ready to bring justice to the enemies of the Emperor.

Vulkan meted out that justice.

The gravity was consistent now, closer to the core of the attack moon. He did not feel the same jerks, his mass shifting upwards and to the side. Moving easily, he killed with devastating efficiency, every sword blow striking down three greenskins at a time, the nova blasts of the plasma pistol cremating the xenos.

A full company of legionaries joined Vulkan on the roof of the hull. Their bolters, chainswords and flamers cut through the orks the turrets missed, but more greenskins came to replace every fallen enemy.

The Termite slowed even more, and two huge orks, pushing their underlings on to sacrifice themselves beneath the treads, mounted the hull. Their weapons were so large, and their strength so great, that they began to break through the seams of the hull's plating.

Vulkan fell upon them with fury. His judgement was tectonic. As big as the orks were, they could not stand up to him any more than they could an earthquake. He shattered their piston-driven armour with *Nightforged*. A shot from *Anvil's Light* melted the chest of one. The other lunged around Vulkan and seized him from behind. It tightened arms thick as tree trunks around his throat. It bit into his drake's helmet, shattering its tusks as they sought purchase. Vulkan stabbed *Nightforged* back beside his left flank. At the first blow, the ork howled. At the second, it tightened its grip. At the third, the howls ceased. The beast released him and fell.

The *Spear of Fire* slewed towards the wall, sending up a sheet of flesh. Ork reinforcements poured into the chamber from a gallery overhead, but of the tens of thousands that had been in the hall, more than half were gone. Vulkan and his gunners were slaughtering them faster than they could arrive.

A huge chieftain to the rear bellowed, and the mass of the smaller orks rushed to the front of the *Spear*. Somehow, the greenskins feared the chieftain more than they did the certainty of annihilation. There was a sudden influx of bodies pressing against the machine. It slowed yet further. The treads spun and spun. The Termite was less than three metres from the wall but was close to stalling.

Vulkan ran forwards, his sword parting the orks before him like sheaves of rotten grain. 'Lascannons forward,' he ordered. 'Ignore the flanks. I want all our las ahead of us. Legionaries, pull back inside.' He stopped just before the shrieking cone of the drill head. He changed the setting of *Anvil's Light* and held the trigger down, aiming at the tidal surge of orks. The plasma pistol's

charge built up to the extent that the ornately wrought weapon trembled with the heat contained inside. It reached the point of self-destruction, but an instant before its end occurred, Vulkan unleashed the shot.

Killing daylight erupted in the hall. A volcano roared in anger, and a fireball engulfed the orks before the Termite. It left nothing in its wake, reducing the very ash of the bodies to atoms.

For a few seconds there was only fire, not xenos muscle, ahead of the Termite. The treads ground through bodies, found rock, and the machine surged forwards again. The drill shredded the wall, the cannons blasted upwards and Vulkan crouched low over the hull as the wall came down. Wreckage smashed against him but could not dislodge him. Rock and metal could not move him, for he was of them, and they were the materials of his art.

The chieftain shouted in impotent rage at the Termite. But just before the machine entered the wall, the beast stopped and Vulkan thought he saw the glint of animal cunning in the huge ork's eyes. Then it began to run with a purpose, leaping up to the galleries.

Vulkan dropped back inside the pilot's hatch as the avalanche crushed the orks. The *Spear of Fire* descended quickly through the rubble and was tunnelling through the matter of the attack moon once more.

'There are some minor breaches to the integrity of the hull,' T'kell reported as the primarch rejoined him. 'And the orks' cursed flesh is in the gears, slowing us down.'

'We are still moving,' said Vulkan, grasping the turret controls once more. 'While we move, we come closer to victory.'

T'kell angled the Termite downwards through the walls, and now the machine was descending almost vertically again, breaking through roofs and floors of corridors and chambers. It ruptured pipes carrying the filthy promethium of the orks and ignited it. Fires spread behind and about. The orks raged as their base burned and floors collapsed.

Whether through instinct or some brutish version of strategy, the orks were tracking the Termite with greater accuracy now. Explosives went off in its path, and walls fell in. Whenever it emerged in a wider space, it was caught in a crossfire of shelling and booby-trapped floors.

But the *Spear of Fire* dropped deeper yet. Orks attacked in swarms, and Vulkan caught glimpses on the pict screens of caverns beyond the shaft with ever greater hordes. There were hundreds of thousands of orks in the attack moon, waiting their turn to be unleashed on Antaeum, to destroy the remains of the XVIII Legion then sweep on to the annihilation of the Taras System.

Their greatest strength, he thought again. *Their greatest weakness.* The destruction of the attack moon would end the orks' threat in a single blow.

The Termite hit a wall that was dense with explosives. The blast was enormous. It was more than a single bomb. It was bombs and shells and built-up gas. It was as if the orks were trying to destroy their own base. The structure of the planetoid erupted and forced the Termite off its track, down another route where the ground suddenly collapsed between the treads, forming a sharp slope.

They are herding us, Vulkan thought as the Termite crashed through the lower wall of the chamber the orks had prepared.

For a moment, as he jumped out of the hatch once again, Vulkan thought the space was a mustering hall. There must have been a hundred thousand orks present. Then he saw the crane and the immense claw that hung from the girders that criss-crossed the ceiling.

The immense army hurled itself against the Termite. The orks hit with such force on the port side that they turned the vehicle over. Vulkan strode easily to the new top of the hull. The presence of treads on all sides meant the *Spear of Fire* could fight and advance from any position, but the shock of the impact slowed it, and the jaws of the crane dropped from above. The jaws were monumental, more than fifteen metres high and so thick they seemed more designed to crush than to carry. They closed over the Termite and slammed shut a short distance aft of the drill head. The force was so great the hull cracked.

The jaws hauled back. The girders cried out in protest and began to bend. One pulled out of the wall and fell to the floor below, crushing orks beneath it.

The Termite rose, drill head spinning fruitlessly, the treads from its forward half grinding in mid-air, those in the rear pushing against the floor but with insufficient force to break free from the ork device.

Perched on the girders, the huge ork chieftain laughed as it stopped the Legion's advance.

The turrets unleashed las and bolt shells against the claw. The impacts scored and dented the metal, but the construction was so thick, it absorbed the shots. Vulkan sheathed his weapons and vaulted off the hull, onto the claw. He used shell holes and ragged metal construction for handholds and climbed, fast as sprinting, towards the chieftain's position. The ork roared at him and fired its massive shotgun. The shells smacked into Vulkan's armour with heavy blows, but he kept his grip and did not slow.

A few metres from the top, he yanked upwards with such force that he flew up at the ork, drawing *Nightforged* at the same instant. The greenskin jumped

at him and they clashed, Vulkan's sword cutting the shotgun in half, the ork bringing a chainaxe against Vulkan's shoulder. The weapon's blade was a metre and a half across, and the ork was so strong that the teeth cut into the primarch's magnificent armour.

The ork grabbed Vulkan's sword arm, the fingers of its enormous hand wrapping all the way around. Vulkan slammed his fist into the ork's face. Bone cracked and the beast staggered back, releasing him. Its malignant, alien eyes glowered at Vulkan. Then, for a split second, it glanced away, as if waiting for something. An expression like fear crossed its face. It was not afraid of Vulkan, but of the thing that was driving it on.

'You are full of pride, xenos savage, and you are wrong,' Vulkan said. The ork would not understand his words, but it would hear the contempt in his voice. 'There is no art in this construct, no craft, and neither does it have the honesty of stone. It and you are fit only to be smashed.'

The ork responded to his taunt with fury, but there was a desperation in its charge, and again Vulkan thought it was the fear of something else, rather than anger at him, that pushed it forwards. It swung the chainaxe wildly, blue smoke billowing from the weapon's engine.

Vulkan ducked beneath the swings and stabbed at the chieftain. *Nightforged* cut through the ork's armour and into its chest. Its next swing struck him on the gorget. The blow was stunning, and the ork hit him again as he began to reach for *Anvil's Light*, forcing him to grab hold of the girders instead to keep from falling.

The ork came in again, smashing relentlessly. The beast was as fast as it was strong. Vulkan lurched into the blows, pushing back against them, and he slashed at the chieftain's face. He cut deep into flesh and muscle and bone. Blood poured down the ork's features. Its mouth was split in two vertically. Its lower jaws hung loosely. It screamed at him and dropped its weapon as it lunged forwards, seizing him in a death grip and pushing off from the girders, seeking to bring them both down thirty metres to the floor. Vulkan saw the attack coming and grounded himself. He took the force of the ork's rush and held fast. The chieftain could not topple him, and he brought *Nightforged* up with a jerk and sank it deeply into the ork's guts. He hauled upwards, feeling things give way in the creature's body.

The hateful fire in its eyes dimmed. But even as it died, its last roar sounded like laughter.

Then the thunder of artillery rocked the cavern.

SIX

SEVERED ARTERY / WARLORD / THE FURNACE

Despair has never been in the blood of the Legion. There was a time, however, when hope seemed as alien. Hope is ours, and it must be as tempered and tested as every other facet of our identity. It is our right through forging. We are formed upon the anvil, through fire and hammer. The creation is painful, and the pain is necessary. What emerges is stronger and wiser for the tempering, and by its own existence justifies the reality of hope.

– Vulkan, *Lessons of the Anvil*

The explosion hurled Numeon up, through ork bodies, towards the cavern wall. For a few seconds his auto-senses were as disrupted as his own thoughts were from the concussion.

‘Squad, call out,’ he shouted, as much to clear his head as to know who was alive. He rose to his feet, still blind, as the other four responded.

‘Form on my position,’ he called. He almost fell again. He couldn’t seem to find his feet. Then his vision cleared. The roar was not in his ears, and the unsteadiness was not his own. The explosion seemed to be unending. There were deep, reverberating cracks, and the grind of rock against rock. Beneath his feet, the dome was rising and falling.

‘I rejoice that I am still alive,’ Caelius said dryly.

‘They did not mean to, but the orks shielded us from the worst of the blast,’ Numeon said. The seismic charge had thrown Numeon and his brothers free of the crater. The orks at the centre had been turned into an indistinguishable

mass of burned and crushed bodies.

The centre of the crater fell in, and the chamber filled with lethal orange light. The heat spiked.

‘Then let us honour their sacrifice and leave,’ said Orasus.

There were still hundreds of orks in the cavern. They were howling in confusion as the ground gave way. The deep fissures opened, and the molten rock pushed through. The ground fell, then rose again, chunks of the dome floating on the rising magma like ice floes.

‘We have very few seconds,’ Numeon shouted. ‘Let us use them well.’ At any moment, the cavern and everything in it might vanish in a single blast.

The orks were distressed, but they could still see an enemy. They tried to attack. As they charged, chunks of rock split beneath them and tipped them into the magma, and they died, screaming, burning and drowning.

The rock Numeon was standing on upended. He scrambled up the sudden incline, away from the magma. He jumped to the next rock, then to the next, moving quickly. Everything was changing in the cavern. There was nothing to judge, only seconds to make the decisions that each moment demanded, even if the next proved that decision to be fatal.

He was almost at the wall when he realised the cavern’s ceiling was closer. The fragmenting dome was rising.

Caelius had noticed too. ‘We don’t have as far to climb,’ he said.

‘I’m not sure that’s a good thing,’ Numeon answered. Then, with another leap, he was at the wall. Caelius landed a metre to his right an instant later.

Numeon found handholds and started to climb. The others followed, and they ascended six metres in seconds.

A huge tremor shook the cavern. The walls felt as insubstantial as a dream, and they crumbled. Orks had still been coming into the cavern. Now some were climbing down and others were trying to escape, torn between the love of battle and their terror. Now they fell like leaves into the rising heat.

Caelius cursed as the section of wall he was holding broke away. Numeon snatched for him. He caught Caelius’ gauntlet, but the sudden jerk pulled him free and they both dropped. Numeon grasped desperately at the wall and grabbed a ledge, stopping their fall only a metre from the rising inferno.

Orasus and the others began to climb back down. ‘Keep climbing!’ Numeon yelled. ‘That is an order!’

The inside of the wall had fallen away beneath him, turning the cliff face concave. Caelius hung in the air, unable to haul himself up.

The magma came higher, and the air passing through Numeon’s rebreather was a harsh burning in his lungs.

‘I have you, brother,’ Numeon said to Caelius. With a grunt, he lifted the

weight of the other Space Marine with one arm.

‘I rejoiced too soon,’ said Caelius.

Beneath him, magma gouted upwards suddenly. A fountain of it engulfed Caelius. His body shielded Numeon to a degree. A chunk of rock slammed into him, knocking him free of Numeon’s grip.

Numeon cried out, his arm clutching at air. The fountain subsided, and Caelius fell with it, disappearing under the magma. He resurfaced briefly, his struggle as heroic as it was futile, his hand reaching for aid that was too far away, and he went down again. Seconds later, his roar on the vox was silenced.

The entire heaving mass of rock and magma rose closer to Numeon. Cursing, he climbed again, racing to catch up with the others.

The tremors increased in intensity, and more of the walls came down. Orks crowded near the cavern ceiling, holding fast and bellowing as everything disintegrated. Still the instinct to fight was there, and the ones nearest the squad were scrabbling across the shaking cliff face to reach the legionaries. Orasus paused long enough to pull a krak grenade from his belt. He hurled it at a point just ahead of the orks. They kept coming, and the grenade went off as they passed over where it had stuck to the rock. It melted the hands of one and the brute fell, screaming. The blast weakened a wide portion of the cliff and a huge chunk broke away, hundreds of tonnes of rock plunging down, taking a score of the enemy with it. The slab smacked into the rising fury, smashing through the thin, tattered skin of stone. A pillar of magma shot up from the site of the impact with such violence that it slammed against the ceiling, spreading liquid fire across the cavern.

Molten rock fell on the squad. Numeon blinked off the warning runes of his auto-senses. He knew how bad things were. He climbed moment by moment, dragging himself upwards, reaching for handholds he barely saw before he grasped them. The world of the cavern was about to split wide open. There was nothing substantial here, nothing real except the glowing death.

‘*Go!*’ Numeon shouted. His brothers had looked down at him and hesitated, as if they might wait for him. He climbed faster.

The entrance to the cavern was much larger now. The ceiling was cracking, and rents were opening all across it. A mob of greenskins on the far side of the opening shouted and fired at the legionaries. Blasius was closest to the top of the wall and he returned fire one-handed, the placing of his shots precise despite the tremors. His first few bursts exploded savage skulls. Then Saluran and Orasus joined him. Three streams of bolt shells blasted the orks.

The ceiling split wider. A huge, wedge-shaped piece fell from the opening, and the surviving orks retreated from the spreading catastrophe.

Climb, Numeon thought. *Climb*. He focused on the opening as if it were salvation, as if it meant the end of the race. As if it meant victory. He did not look down. To do so was meaningless. Whether the magma continued to rise, or the entire bottom third of the cone exploded, each instant did not predict the next.

The rumble of cracking, breaking rock drowned out the screams of the burning orks. Numeon caught up with the squad as the others crossed the boundary into the narrower region of the fissure. They were still firing, and the orks were in full retreat, chased by bolters and the knowledge that here and now Antaeum was their enemy, and it could not be fought.

The four legionaries climbed again. The shaking never stopped. Rocks fell at them constantly, bouncing off helms and pauldrons. The exit from the fissure was impossibly far.

'What odds we get to the top?' said Blasius.

'What odds that it matters?' Orasus asked.

It doesn't, Numeon thought. The purpose of what they had done was to destroy everything on the other side of that opening. There was no safety there. The legionaries were the harbingers of doom.

They climbed, notwithstanding, taking the moments and knowing each might be the last. But every moment, getting another metre up the shaft. Another moment, another moment, another moment.

And then there were no moments to come.

The rumble became a cataclysmic *crack* that swallowed all sound. It was so huge, it was the final sound. The mountain rose up and struck Numeon.

He was smashed, he was burned, and he was flying.

He should have blacked out. There should have been oblivion. How could an event this immense leave room for consciousness? He remained aware, but his reality broke down into fragments, an infernal mosaic of disaster.

The opening of the fissure rushing towards him.

No sense of anything except fire and rock.

Movement again, and blows, and always movement – terrible, killing movement.

The exit from the fissure rushing closer, then suddenly growing wide, exploding and vanishing in dust and ash and flame.

Still flying, caught in a cloud of burning gas. The heat beyond measure, the lava enraged at liberty, claiming the ground and the war as its own.

A instant of limbo in the reddish grey, a blessed instant when nothing was striking him.

And then he was arcing down, down through the storm, buffeted by winds and explosions and flying stone. Coherent thought was impossible, but a

ragged wish tore across his mind, the wish that he not fall into the embrace of lava. Not now. Not after this flight.

He had no taste for such irony.

The impact came so suddenly, he did not have time to prepare for it. There was just the jolting, brutal crash to earth. It registered first as an explosion of agony across his entire frame. He did not know what the pain meant. It simply consumed him, blocking all other sensory impressions. He could not see or hear or taste anything except the pain.

Numeon groaned, pushing the pain back, parting its crimson curtain to see again. Think again. Act again.

He pushed himself up. His armour was still working, but the gears of the servo-motors were slipping throughout the joints, creating resistance. The arms and legs wanted to move in random directions. Given a chance, the vibrations would take over the motion of the power armour. He forced it to behave, his strength enough to hold the tremors at bay, but his actions had become slower, more deliberate. He felt as if he were moving through water.

There were fractures in the armour and fractures in his body, deep ones, with splinters of bone stabbing inwards to wound the organs they should have protected. He was mobile, though, and he could fight. The rest was irrelevant for now. It was entirely possible it would never matter. He had not heard the voice that had spoken to Vaughn. He did not share the lord commander's desire to hope. What he knew was his duty, and that was enough. Every ork he killed was one less that would reach the populations of the inner planets.

Yes, that would have to be enough. And he had killed many orks this night.

'Brothers,' he voxed, his voice sounding strangely battered in his ears.

There were two answers.

'*Orasus*.'

'*Saluran*.'

'Blasius?' Numeon called, but there was no reply.

Numeon blinked his auto-senses back on. At the same time, his head cleared enough for him to take in his surroundings. He had landed a hundred metres ahead of the leading edge of the lava, in a jumbled mound where two previous flows had collided and cooled. The orks were in full retreat. Lava poured from the bottom of the volcano. The flow was wide as a lake, and it moved with the destructive energy of a river in flood. There was no break in its width, no way of crossing it to reach the upper slopes of the cone and the stronghold crouching on them. Thousands of orks, perhaps tens of thousands, had already perished. The army that had been pushing towards the Cauldron was gone, swallowed by the tidal wave of red. Here and there, Numeon saw a portion of one of the greenskins' crude vehicles or a cannon slowly turning

over in the lava, a metallic corpse pointing at the sky before disappearing beneath the shifting current of molten rock.

The survivors were fleeing the advancing lava, racing south, back towards the other mountain chain. So far the orks had not noticed the legionaries, though Numeon saw greenskins pass within a hundred metres of his position.

Numeon picked up the signals coming from Orasus and Saluran's armour. They were only a few dozen metres to the south-west of where he stood. He looked for the signature of Blasius' ident-marker, but found nothing. If the legionary was alive, he had fallen into deep silence.

Numeon lurched into a clumsy run towards their positions. 'I am coming, brothers,' he voxed. 'Is Blasius with you?'

There was silence for a few long moments. Numeon wondered if the other two had fallen unconscious. Then Orasus said, '*I can see him, captain. Ten metres from me. He is dead.*'

Mourn later, if there is a later, Numeon thought.

Numeon saw Saluran now, a hunched silhouette on the broken plain. There was movement between the two of them, Orasus getting to his feet. As Numeon reached Orasus, he saw the remains of Blasius. He had been crushed, but not when he had landed. His body lay in the open, the armour shattered and melted. He was barely recognisable as human. There was nothing left of his upper torso and head. His corpse was a limp, pitiful thing, heroism and honour smashed to a memory by the explosion.

Orasus walked with a limp, dragging his left leg, but at least he could walk.

'We cannot stay here,' said Numeon. The lava was only metres away, and the wave was closing in fast.

The three legionaries began moving south, in the same direction as the orks.

'This is not a retreat, brothers,' Numeon said. 'We bring the fire with us. We cover the land they thought to take.'

There was a rocky mound some distance ahead. Numeon could just make it out in the swirl of ash. It might be high enough to use as a refuge from the flood. Numeon looked back towards the volcanic cone. The stronghold was invisible, hidden by the eruption on the lower flank. He faced forward and pointed at the mound. 'That is our target,' he said.

Neither of his brothers asked how they would return to the Cauldron.

The walls to port and starboard of the Termite disintegrated.

The orks had managed to hold the *Spear of Fire* in the hall long enough to bring their weapons to bear. There were no openings large enough for the guns, so the orks knocked the walls down with cannon fire before turning the huge barrels on the Termite. The attack was madness, though it was also the

product of a dangerous instinctive cunning. The cannons were too big for any rational army to use in an enclosed space.

The orks were not rational. They created a volcanic hell of explosions and rejoiced in the devastation.

The shells hammered the Termite, and the claw still held it fast. ‘How close are we to the core?’ Vulkan asked T’kell.

‘*The measure is approximate, lord primarch. No more than a few kilometres.*’

This was as far as they would go, Vulkan accepted. And it would be far enough. The explosions reverberated through the stone of the attack moon, and the vibrations were further revelations to Vulkan. The simultaneous detonations of the seismic charges in a ring around this position would be fatal to the monster. ‘Praetors,’ he voxed. He jumped from the girders onto the claw, deeper into the centre of the bombardment. ‘Mobilise your companies. Begin your advances. Two thousand metres from this position is your goal.’

The hatches opened on the sides of the Termite, and the orks shouted in triumph. Their joy was short-lived as the true strength of the vehicle was unleashed upon them. Divided into eight companies, one thousand legionaries stormed out into the midst of the shelling. Seven radiated out from the *Spear of Fire*, while the eighth stayed with the Termite, Captain Ber’han at its head. Rhy’tan was part of it. This was where the Igniax needed to be. The events he must witness would unfold here.

Beneath the thunder of the guns, Vulkan heard another roaring. It came from a single voice. The thing that the chieftain had feared was coming close.

This, Vulkan thought, *this is the crucible. Now is the lesson that must be learned.*

Taunted by Vulkan and his elevated position, blown up by their own shells and cut apart by a perfectly organised foe, the greenskins reacted with confusion. There were cross-currents in the green tide as the orks tried to reach Vulkan at the same time as they also went after the companies. The sea of brutes was in full turbulence.

The companies advancing from the starboard side of the Termite reached the cannons. They had punched their way through the orks with zeal and discipline. Now coordinated rocket fire from the legionaries slammed into the barrels of the guns. Two of them, ruptured as they fired, exploded, creating a gap. But behind them more cannons were arriving, and the bellow of the approaching monster sounded almost like words, a challenge, as if the enemy had heard Vulkan’s declaration and had come to prove it to be a lie.

A gargantuan ork warlord thundered through the breach in the wall. It shoved aside the smoking ruins of the cannons and trampled smaller orks

beneath its feet. It glared at Vulkan and loosed a roar fit to bring down the ceiling of the cavernous hall. Its body was encased in armour so thick it looked as if the monster were wearing tanks. Each step as it marched towards the Termite shook the floor like the impact of a shell. Its hands were as big as power claws, and it wielded a monstrous chainhammer. The head of the weapon was half as big as Vulkan.

The giant crossed the hall, pounding the floor with an earthquake tread as it rushed to the clash with Vulkan. The currents in the sea of orks shifted again, as all the greenskins who saw it run turned and ran with it, ignoring the Legion companies as they passed through the fallen walls to spread out into the attack moon. The orks' leader was set on destroying the lone challenger atop the machine, and so they followed.

'Pause for nothing, my sons,' Vulkan said, and they obeyed. He saw with satisfaction that they did not try to take out the new cannons arriving to the fray. If the legionaries tried to stop the artillery bombardment, they would wind up bogged down in this one hall.

'We must see the ground to be taken,' Vulkan told his Legion as the warlord drew closer. 'We must see the stands that are necessary. And if there is a sacrifice to make, let it be the one with purpose. Know why you make it. Know why it must be done.'

Shells smashed the floor, and the Termite, and the claw. Vulkan stood his ground, holding firm where the claw trapped the vehicle. He charged *Anvil's Light*, readying a welcome for the huge ork.

A grouping of cannon shots hit right in front of him, obscuring the hall in a storm of fire and dust. The girders of the ceiling gave way. The claw and the Termite fell, and the enormous, ruinous fusion of Imperial and xenos metal crashed to the deck. His boots mag-locked to the surface of the hull, his balance sure as a mountain's, Vulkan rode the drop. He was ready, waiting in the same position, as the giant burst through the flames, its monstrous hammer raised over its head with both hands.

Vulkan fired *Anvil's Light*. The shot enveloped the frontal armour of the beast. It melted through a foot of dense metal, and exposed and burned the corded flesh beneath. A shot that would have evaporated a score of the warlord's underlings did not even slow it down.

The ork arrived before Vulkan, leapt onto the hull and swung the great hammer down. The weapon was offensively crude and yet, as he dodged away from its head, which was covered with half a dozen spinning chains, Vulkan recognised the power it held. He saw the pride of the beast in the summit of its art.

In this moment of realisation, he acknowledged that it was right that they

should meet now.

The hammer struck the hull of the *Spear of Fire* with explosive force. The air rippled outwards and there was a clap of thunder. In the same instant the strike split the hull open, another barrage came down, and the explosion that came did not stop.

The echoes of the eruption reverberated through the Cauldron's command centre. On his medicae bed, Vaughn jerked with new pain, consciousness racing back to him again.

Xerexenia was leaning over him. 'Lava is flowing from the lower portion of the cone, lord commander,' she said. 'First Captain Numeon was successful.'

'Contact him,' said Vaughn.

'We are attempting to do so, lord commander.' Behind her, serfs were occupied with the vox-unit.

While Vaughn waited, Xerexenia read out the results of the eruption in her flat, machinic buzz. 'The flow is a large one,' she said. 'Its spread is rapid and ongoing. While it lasts, it will provide an effective barrier to the orks. They are retreating.'

Retreating for now, Vaughn thought. The reversal of fortune would last only until the end of the eruption, if then. But the Cauldron had more time. Enough, he hoped, for the truth of the new fleet to be revealed.

Vaughn pushed the thought of final outcomes from his mind. There was room only in his pain to focus on one event at a time, and thus it had to be the most immediate. 'Numeon,' he said, forgetting that Xerexenia was controlling the communications, 'can you hear me?'

Vaughn blinked and time slipped. He lost a few seconds, because Xerexenia was suddenly leaning over him, when she had been standing before her console, a few metres away, the moment before.

'I have Captain Numeon,' Xerexenia said. She adjusted the controls on the vox, lowering the sound of the primary open channel, but not shutting it off. She brought a second unit closer to Vaughn.

'Artellus?' Vaughn said.

'*We have succeeded, lord commander.*'

'You have. And you have survived.'

'*Some of us have. Not all.*'

'Where are you?'

'*On a cooled mound a few kilometres south of the mountain's base. We are relaying coordinates now.*'

'We will send a Thunderhawk to extract you.'

'*Flying conditions are extremely poor, lord commander.*'

‘Everything is extremely poor, Artellus. So we must try.’

Reth Sho’mar’s Sixth Company fought through a passage formed by the intersections of fused wreckage. The walls leaned at all angles. Where they came together, they formed an irregular ceiling. Where they didn’t, shafts gaped upwards into darkness. Other, smaller passages and fissures intersected with the main tunnel, and its direction was jagged, advancing straight for fifty metres or so at most. Orks attacked from ahead and behind, and on the flanks at every intersection. The protruding wreckage gave plenty of cover for both forces.

Sound tactics would have been to take the passage gradually, advancing from cover to cover. Strategically, that was not an option. The seismic charges had to be placed quickly. The assault in the main cavern could not hold and withstand the main ork counter-attack indefinitely.

The legionaries charged through the passage, firing to the sides as they approached each intersection, sending grenades around corners, maintaining a steady onslaught of flamer and bolter fire ahead, blasting through wreckage and orks.

The greenskins came in their thousands, but the narrower confines worked to the advantage of the XVIII. Off to Sho’mar’s right, through the tangle of scrap metal, there was a hint of a larger space, and something big moved. A cannon went off. The jagged mass of plating was too thick for the shell and the gun blew up, triggering a collapse. The walls and ceiling of the passageway sagged and now the company was running, crouched, through a triangle.

Sho’mar ran faster, setting the pace, and the legionaries charged head-on into ork bullets and blades.

‘Do we still have a signal for the primarch’s position?’ Sho’mar asked.

‘We do,’ said Veteran Ven’tal. He and Legionary Nal’kor had the seismic charge. ‘We are less than a thousand metres from the target point. But if the greenskins bring more cannons on us, they can trap us here.’

‘*If* they do,’ said Sho’mar. ‘I do not think they will.’ The company had barrelled past so many guns that were being trained on the great hall. ‘Lord Vulkan has drawn the greater strength of the enemy to him. The orks intend their guns for him. We are fighting a distracted and diminished force.’

The passageway angled sharply and dropped. The company ripped through another group of orks and entered the cargo hold of what had once been a human freighter. There was a large body of a few thousand orks here, but there were no more arriving from the other entrances into the hold. The magnitude of what Vulkan had achieved became clear. The orks elsewhere in

the attack moon were answering the call of their leader and responding to the threat of the great challenger.

Vulkan had come as close as he could to clearing the way for his companies.

The remainder of a greenskin horde in the cargo bay was barrier enough, and the orks had vehicles here, armoured transports as ramshackle as they were solid.

‘Lord protector,’ Ven’tal voxed. ‘The doors on the far side are less than two hundred metres from our target range.’

‘The path is clear,’ Sho’mar said. ‘It takes us through the foe.’

At the sight of the legionaries, more than half of the thousands of orks present ran forwards, while the others piled into the trucks. The Sixth Company spilled into the bay, formed up into blocks of ten warriors and hit the orks with a wall of fire. The brutes went down, pulverised before they could get within range.

Now a score of trucks came roaring across the deck, filling the stinking air with thick smoke. The vehicles charged like battering rams, huge spikes on their grilles, orks manning crude heavy stubbers and shotguns hanging onto their sides and roofs.

Sho’mar held position as long as possible, directing fire past the grilles and through the windscreens. One of the drivers was splattered across its compartment. The corpse slumped over the controls and the truck careened on. It veered wildly, flipped and rolled towards the company.

Sho’mar and his squad ran to the side as the vehicle crushed orks, burst into flames and collided with the rear wall of the bay. The other squads evaded the first, disorganised charges of the trucks, but huge, spiked wrecking balls, swung from crane arms mounted on the machines, flew outwards from the momentum of the turns. A ball caught Legionary Ra’zak square in the chest, impaled him on the spikes and lifted him high in the air. The truck turned again, away from the end of the bay. The ball slammed Ra’zak against the wall and down into wreckage. As the truck pulled away, the ball stuck for an instant in the ruin, then came out dragging the burning legionary, now enmeshed in the debris of the other vehicle, with it.

The orks drove in mad circles, their trucks rampaging weaponised monsters. They turned the cargo bay into a maelstrom of careening vehicles as they tried to crush the legionaries under their spiked wheels.

The squads moved fast and maintained unit coherence. Every legionary was a veteran of the struggles against the raiders on Nocturne. Those dark figures had vehicles too, and they were much faster and more agile than anything belonging to the orks. The Nocturneans knew how to battle this kind of foe.

‘Draw them in,’ Sho’mar ordered.

His warriors moved along the periphery of the cargo bay and concentrated fire on a truck closing on them. They paused, then moved suddenly as one to the right. The ork vehicle slewed around, almost upended, then came back at them. But it had bled off speed, and now the squad charged at it.

Sho'mar reached the truck first. He jumped over the grille, landed on the hood and sprayed bolt shells over the roof, taking out the front gunners. The driver shrieked in fury and jerked the truck from side to side as if he could shake Sho'mar off. Other legionaries climbed the truck on both sides and set up a crossfire, killing the rest of the orks on board. The driver screamed. It turned even more erratically.

Sho'mar grabbed one of the ork corpses and dropped it in front of the driver, blocking the ork's view. Then he and his squad jumped off. Maddened and blinded, frenzied in its attempts to get rid of the foe, the driver cared only for speed and drove the truck head-on into another. The vehicles hit each other hard enough that their fronts crumpled and fused together, before they exploded with such force that they rose into the air. They came back down and two others could not change their courses in time and crashed into the wreckage.

Two more trucks, either through luck or skill, avoided the disaster, veered around the edges of the blaze and came back together on the other side to plough into the legionaries before they could regroup. Te'bel went under the wheels. Grille spikes impaled Un'ash and held him like a bloody trophy, driving him away from his brothers while the orks turned all of their fire onto the trapped Space Marine.

Terminator Koral Ru'than whirled and hit the back of a truck with a rocket, tearing away the rear half of the vehicle. The truck dragged sparks along the deck as it slewed to a stop. Sho'mar and the others ran to the wreck. Un'ash was dead, and the surviving orks were laughing over his corpse.

The legionaries cut their triumph short with fire.

Flame now filled the room as the other squads killed more vehicles. Casualties were mounting on both sides, though the orks had the worst of it. But now the xenos came together, united not by strategy but by instinct and battle fury. A solid line of vehicles roared across the cargo bay, cutting off lines of escape.

A group of five legionaries had no chance at all to evade. They were in the centre of the cargo bay floor, too close to the trucks, and had seconds only to turn and stand their ground, hurling shells and grenades into the enemy. It was not enough. The vehicles rode over them, impaled them on spikes and smashed them flat with wrecking balls.

The trucks came on, a solid wall of greenskin machinery, set on scraping the

bay clear of the XVIII Legion.

‘Form a wedge!’ Sho’mar ordered, bracing for the impact. The truck bearing down on him had a blade that was taking all of his shots. And on the vox, all he heard from the chamber with the *Spear of Fire* was the shouts of more brothers, the thunder of explosions. Then he heard the steady beat of tremendous blows. It was the sound of a hammer against an anvil, and it renewed his determination.

Sho’mar charged the truck. ‘Rockets!’ he yelled, and a cluster of missiles streaked into the centre vehicles, destroying them utterly. The blade rushing at Sho’mar went flying end over end above his head.

The legionaries ran into the fireballs, passing through the flame to come out the other side of the furnace of their own making. They trained their fire on the rear of the trucks, and now the destruction began in earnest.

The tunnel down which Kal’ma led his company was an ancient lava tube boring through a massive planetoid fragment. It descended abruptly, the surface so smooth the footing became treacherous. A horde of orks boiled up from below to meet the legionaries.

‘Seismic charge carriers, drop back,’ Kal’ma ordered, and the rest of the company spread out, wall-to-wall in the tube, their bolter fire scything into the orks.

The beasts stumbled over each other, their uphill charge faltering under the attack, and then the company smashed into them with the force of a maglev train. Kal’ma held his bolt pistol before him, trigger depressed and slashed with his chainsword. Xenos flesh parted, and bones shattered from his battering ram charge.

‘*Less than five hundred metres,*’ the call came over the vox.

‘We are nearly there, brothers,’ Kal’ma shouted, and he shot his way through the last of the orks before him. The way to the end of the tunnel was clear.

Kal’ma pounded down the slope. It was so steep and his momentum was so strong, it would have been difficult to stop. The tunnel ended at a wide opening, and the floor changed from stone to metal. The company ran out onto a sixty metre-long piece of ragged decking that jutted into the midst of a spherical cavern.

The walls were honeycombed with dozens of galleries, their layers running its entire height. The cavern was an intersection of tunnels. Every gallery was a pathway to other regions of the greenskin base, and the orks were passing through in their thousands, most of them heading inwards, answering Vulkan’s challenge and the call of their warlord. Some, however, stopped when they saw the company.

Fire that was undisciplined but dense as a hailstorm erupted from the height and breadth of the cavern. It battered the company's position, pinning the legionaries where they stood.

The far wall was in the target range. Kal'ma cursed to see it so close yet denied to them by fire.

The Thunderhawk *Volcanic* flew by again but could not make a landing. Winds screamed over the peak of cooled rock, clutching at Numeon, Orasus and Saluran with talons that tried to hurl them into the air. The jutting protrusion they clung to was shaped like a claw and some ten metres high. Already it was less a shelter than a prison.

The lava flowed past the claw, blocking any move to the north for Numeon and the others. To the south, it was losing its strength and the orks were coming back. In their thousands, they fired at the *Volcanic*. Their reinforcements had arrived from over the mountain chain now, and there was artillery with them. The anti-air fire was as erratic as it was intense. At that volume, if the gunship paused long enough to pick up the three legionaries, it would surely be brought down.

A hulking silhouette appeared in the distance. It raised a mechanical claw, exhorting its followers to head back towards the Cauldron.

'Lord Commander Vaughn's bane has returned,' said Numeon.

'How long do you think we can hold them off?' Orasus asked.

'Do you mean can we do it until *Volcanic* can attempt a landing?'

Orasus looked up at the streaks of ork fire. They formed a jagged web above the rock claw.

'I do not think the landing is very likely,' said Saluran.

'Then we fight with no end in sight,' Numeon declared. 'It will not be the first time we have done so.'

'I need no end of killing orks,' said Orasus.

Saluran nodded. 'They will tire of this war before I do,' he said, looking down the sights of his bolter at the encroaching horde.

The warlord was closer now. Its very form was the destroyer of hope. It urged its followers forwards. They confronted the lava, mounting the crawling, half-congealed flood. The ones that broke through the crust and burned were mocked by the others who ran on.

Volcanic attempted another pass at the claw but was again frustrated by wind and enemy. '*I am sorry, brothers. Your rescue is still beyond my reach*,' Carvanon voxed.

'You are here to fight with us,' Numeon said. 'We ask no more than that. Join us in the slaughter of our foe, brother.'

The Thunderhawk flew south, guns and rockets roaring into the orks.

The greenskins were in range now, and Numeon opened fire. Every pull of the trigger was a denial of odds, a refusal of defeat.

Every expended shell was a defiance of the end that roared towards him.

Once the explosions began, they never stopped. The shells had finally broken the strength of the *Spear of Fire*, and when that strength went, it went all at once. Armaments and fuel erupted in concert with the endlessly falling shells. Vulkan and the ork warlord disappeared in the cataclysm. A huge fireball rose to the ceiling of the hall and roiled over the orks attacking the Termite. The force of the blast knocked Rhy'tan down, and his armour sealed itself tightly against the first heat of the explosions. But the shutters dropped from his auto-senses before the fire dissipated, and for a few seconds he was moving through a world aflame.

'Lord Vulkan!' Rhy'tan shouted, and he tried to move towards the centre of the blast. When the fireball faded at last, the combined wreckage of the Termite, the girders and the claw formed a mound of smoking, guttering scrap that rose halfway to the ceiling.

The company had been scattered by the destruction of the *Spear of Fire*, but Rhy'tan could see T'kell and the others, and he made his way to them, killing stunned orks as he did.

'Where is he?' said T'kell over the vox. It was the only way they could communicate over the artillery barrage. The shells kept coming down on the wreckage. Continuing internal explosions reshaped it, and its silhouette looked slightly different each time it emerged from behind the smoke and din of the bombardment.

'Listen!' Rhy'tan shouted. 'Listen to the interior!'

What he had thought were secondary explosions were blows. The two giants were fighting within the furnace of the wreckage. For a dizzying moment, Rhy'tan saw the duel as a mirror to the war the Legion was fighting within the attack moon, and he knew with the certitude of illumination that both conflicts would end with triumphant eruptions.

A shell landed only a few feet from Rhy'tan. He staggered under the blow but kept his feet.

'*Regroup at the* Spear of Fire,' Captain Ber'han voxed. '*Our task is the same. We must draw the orks to us. Keep them here. Give the seven companies the chance to plant the charges. We hold the line.*'

Rhy'tan moved through a pounding hell. The deck buckled and shook. It was several metres thick, but there were now craters that punched all the way through to deeper levels of the attack moon. He and his brothers were going

deeper into a boiling cauldron of war to make their stand in the centre of the madness. The mount was a metallic volcano. The shells falling around it seemed to come from it now, hurled out like lava bombs. As the legionaries formed up in front of the mound, dodging incoming shells and hunkering down and holding the line, blasting at the orks that came near, becoming that which would not move, Rhy'tan realised this battle was not a cauldron. It was a forge. They stood upon the anvil, and the hammer was falling.

And because they would not move, they were being tempered. Each shell that fell only made them stronger, more determined. They would not move. Five of them would keep this ground. Five of them would act for one. They would act *as* one, and trap the orks here in this battle until the death blow came to the attack moon.

The orks charged forwards in the midst of their shelling.

'Their calling is as strong as ours,' said So'bak.

'Ours is stronger,' said Rhy'tan. 'They only have instinct and the fear of their leader. We have faith in ours, and we have purpose.'

Purpose. There was great truth in that. Rhy'tan felt a sense of purpose that was the same in spirit as the one he had always known on Nocturne, only far greater. He saw the threat the orks represented. He saw what the human galaxy struggled against. He understood now that the duty to protect was not limited to Nocturne. He knew that truth viscerally. He gazed upon the orks with fury. This was what the Terrans had been fighting for a year, and at the thought, a rush of brotherhood spread through his veins like fire.

'We came here to forge a beginning,' Rhy'tan declared, 'and we shall!'

The orks came on, wave building upon wave. The squad backed up and fired from the wreckage. The legionaries were in the midst of flame. The rubble shifted and shook.

T'kell said, 'This is no defensive position.'

'That's right,' said Rhy'tan. 'It is the anvil, and it is ours.' He blew the chest out of an ork. The brute flipped back, landing on its kin behind. They stumbled, and Rhy'tan punched holes through their bodies too.

The squad turned the wave back, and the wave came again, stronger yet, the orks pouring ceaselessly into the hall.

'Look what we do, brothers!' Rhy'tan shouted. 'This is our primarch's example! We are the rock against which the enemy must break!'

We will not be defeated, Rhy'tan thought. The impossibility of victory was before him, but he was untroubled. He and his brothers could not win, yet they would. He refused any other possibility.

The mound heaved. The mound roared. The mound erupted. At its peak,

wreckage exploded aside, flames shooting upwards. And from the top, burned and scorched and roaring thunder, came a monster of nightmare and the hero that was its doom.

Vulkan's armour was scorched from being at the heart of explosions. Shrapnel of a mass and velocity that would have cut a Chimera in two had left rents and gouged him to the bone. The ork warlord's hammer had cracked the chest-plate and driven shards of ceramite deep into his muscle.

The armour bore the scars of battle and fire, and so did Vulkan, but they were not disfigured. They were being shaped on the anvil of war. He was in the centre of a furnace, even now, as he and the warlord had emerged on top of the wreckage. And it was now, when the material was malleable to the craftsman's hammer, that the most crucial blows would be struck.

The battle had marked the ork warlord too. The firestorm of explosions and Vulkan's blows had shattered the pistons on its left leg and torn away the plating of its right arm and shoulder. The massive helmet was shorn of its horns, and Vulkan had driven the spikes of its lower guard into the ork's jaws. Metal and bone were fused, and the ork spat rivers of blood every time it roared. The pain enraged it, and the beast seemed neither weakened nor slowed. If anything, its blows, driven by fury, were even more powerful.

But they were more undisciplined too, more erratic.

Vulkan moved the instant before the hammer came down, too late for the ork to change its aim. He smashed through a twisted girder on his right and came around the warlord's flank. He stabbed *Nightforged* into the grinding gears of the ork's armour. The mechanism melted and smoked, and the blade plunged between the plates and into the body of the monster. The warlord turned into the pain. Vulkan stood his ground as the ork's movement dragged *Nightforged* through its flesh, severing muscle and machinery. Dark, malodorous blood sprayed over Vulkan's arms. The stench was the thick, lung-squeezing smell of rotting fungus.

The ork turned faster, ignoring the gaping wound and using the momentum to swing the hammer around in a lightning strike. Vulkan saw it coming, but this time the attack was too fast. He pulled *Nightforged*, but a mesh of collapsing gears held it fast for a moment. He jerked it free as the hammer smashed into his side.

Every blow of the ork's weapon was like being struck by a mechanised wall. The head's whirring chains had teeth as long as a man's finger. They stuck out at all angles, and they tore around the hammer's head at blinding speed. The weapon shredded as it crushed, and when the ork hit with its full strength, the effect was devastating.

Vulkan was moving right when the ork hit him, and that allowed him to absorb part of the force of the strike, but the monstrous head crushed the side of his armour and shattered his ribs. He stopped himself from flying off the mound by throwing all his weight onto his right leg. It sank into the wreckage, anchoring him. Lightning flares of pain exploded down the entire length of his left flank, but he kept his focus and fired a quick shot with *Anvil's Light*. The warlord recoiled from the plasma burst. More of its helm hung as molten slag, but though its flesh was crisped black, it was as if the beast were made of savagery itself, and it was no more than burned.

The ork glared at Vulkan and swung the hammer again. Vulkan ducked and blocked, slashing at the monster's arms, breaking down the armour. But no matter how much he damaged it, the ork barely slowed. The armour began to seem ornamental, a cage that could barely contain the unstoppable body within.

The ork roared with desperate fury, as if at an instinctual level it understood the kind of hope Vulkan and his Legion represented, and in retaliation sought to teach the XVIII a different lesson, one of futility and extinction. It slammed the hammer down, deliberately missing Vulkan and striking the peak of the wreckage. The impact was tremendous, and the entire mound shifted. New pillars of flame erupted from within, surrounding the combatants. Vulkan kept his feet and launched himself at the ork, blasting at the colossal armour with *Anvil's Light* and slashing at the arms with *Nightforged*, forcing the warlord onto the defensive.

The beast fought on, but it had already lost. The duel had accomplished its end. The great mass of the orks had followed the wrath of their leader. The focus of the greenskin invasion had shifted inwards, to the centre, to this point within the attack moon, leaving the base vulnerable to Vulkan's strategy.

Did his sons see? Did they understand? Did they realise that what he did here, his fight against this monster and the internal paroxysm he had caused in the ork base, was not suicidal? It was planned, strategic and necessary. It was the means to victory.

Below him, a company of his legionaries surrounded the blazing furnace of the wreckage and fought the overwhelming waves of orks with such a fury of purpose that it seemed as if it were the orks that were on the defensive.

Vulkan rejoiced. His sons understood.

The ork swung past his guard and hit him on the shoulder, stunning him and driving him down into the ruins past his knees. It hit him again before he could recover, catching his left arm as he raised it, the meteoric blow smashing *Anvil's Light* from his grasp. It bellowed in triumph and raised the hammer for the death blow.

Vulkan grabbed the shaft of the hammer with one hand. The shock of the impact pushed him further into the ruin. Metal heated to red by the raging furnace at the mound's centre compacted around him, burning through the rents in his armour. Snarling, the ork pressed down. Pushing back was like trying to lift an entire world. The warlord brayed in its barbaric tongue, cursing Vulkan as it shoved him down and down, burying him once again in the volcanic cone of metal.

Vulkan strained against the beast's strength, his arm on the verge of breaking. He found purchase for his feet on more stable debris, while flames enveloped his legs. He braced himself. The pain was irrelevant. There was too much at stake. 'You cannot finish me like this,' he taunted, looking into the glinting yellow of the ork's eyes. 'You know it. You need to hit me again. You know that burying me is not enough. You believe you must shatter me. But I swear to you that even that will not suffice.'

Suddenly, the ork yanked the hammer up. Vulkan let go. The ork hauled the immense weapon back far over its shoulders. It arched its back with the gathering force of the strike.

Vulkan roared and leapt, pushing against the compacted wreckage and out of the furnace. He shot up inside the reach of the monstrous arms and drove *Nightforged* up through the slag of the ork's helm, into its throat, and up and up, into its skull.

The beast's hands spasmed and it dropped the hammer. It remained standing, jaws slack, brain pierced and burned as Vulkan withdrew his blade, turned it on its side and, in a single blow, cut off the monster's head.

Standing astride the flaming destruction, defying the shells that still battered the remains of the Termite, he sheathed *Nightforged* and held the ork's head high. '*With me!*' he shouted, sending his triumph across the vox to every legionary in the ork base. '*With each other! Into the fires of battle! UNTO THE ANVIL OF WAR!*'

The tens of thousands of orks in the smoke-filled hall beheld what he had done, and they howled in dismay.

SEVEN

FROM THE DEPTHS / THE PYRE / FROM THE SKIES

Fire tempers us. Fire shapes us. And we become what we are because we know too that fire destroys. Let us embrace this destruction and harness it to our purpose. To protect our charge, the annihilation of the enemy must be absolute.

– Vulkan, *The Gift of Desolation*

Unto the anvil of war, Sho'mar thought, his blood still blazing from Vulkan's call to brotherhood. The primarch's words fell like the tempering blows of a hammer. He and his company had passed through the furnace, as Vulkan had done, and brought destruction to the orks at the moment the xenos had believed their victory in hand.

The company had not left the cargo bay far behind when Ven'tal said, 'Here, captain. We are far enough. Two thousand metres.'

The passageway leading from the bay was even more irregular than the one before. Sho'mar was moving through a cleavage between wrecks, and the company had paused in a region that was a tangle of metal plates and frameworks so haphazardly welded together, it resembled a frozen explosion.

There were more orks further ahead. Sho'mar could hear their growling thunder, but there was some distance yet between them and the legionaries, and there were no intersection passages here. 'Good,' said Sho'mar. 'Place the charge and conceal it.'

Ven'tal and Shendrak Nal'kor used melta bombs to eat through the criss-crossing girders that formed the wall, creating a space large enough for the

seismic charge. When they had it in place, they used more grenades to collapse the structure around the bomb. It would wait in its nest of metal undisturbed until its death cry was summoned.

Ru'than said, 'This is the longest we have gone without being attacked.'

Sho'mar listened again to the sound of orks ahead. With the noise bouncing and echoing off the metal of the zigzagging passageways, it was difficult to get a fix on distance. The sound was fainter than it had been, though. He was sure of that.

It was time to go. With the Termite destroyed, the final stages of the campaign were heavily dependent on precise coordination and all the companies being in position at the critical juncture. But it was unlikely the orks did not know where the Sixth Company was. The fact that they were not attacking was more than strange. 'I do not like the enemy's anomalous behaviour,' said Sho'mar. He turned to Ven'tal. 'Take the company. Are the coordinates clear?'

'They are, captain. The journey will be a short one.'

'Good. Then be where we must be at the appointed time. I will join you by then.' To Ru'than, he said, 'One squad with me. I want to know what the enemy is doing.'

As the rest of his legionaries headed back in the direction of the cargo bay, Sho'mar's squad of five moved forwards. Sho'mar set a rapid pace, less concerned with stealth than with catching up. The sound had decreased again in just a few seconds. The orks were heading somewhere quickly.

A few minutes into the pursuit, the din of another large group of orks rose from below. That sound grew louder, and then the passageway passed over a larger open area. The deck here was riven by crevasses, and Sho'mar crouched to look down. Beneath the passage was a huge tunnel. It was clearly one of the major arteries of the attack moon, and it was full. A horde of shouting orks stampeded through it, rushing with purpose and in the opposite direction of the great hall. Over the noise of stampeding feet came the piercing wail of bestial horns.

'Where are they fleeing to?' Ru'than wondered.

'They are not fleeing,' said Sho'mar. He heard no panic in the rumble of alien voices. The chieftains he saw below were shouting and pointing forwards. These orks were not routed. They had a goal. Directions were untrustworthy in the grotesque patchwork of the ork base, but the upward slope of the tunnel told Sho'mar what he needed to know. 'They're heading towards the exterior.'

'Where they would have loading bays,' said Ru'than.

'Precisely. This is their full mobilisation.'

Kal’ma swore under his breath as he returned the orks’ fire. Below the deck, there was a sharp drop of about six metres to the slope of the lower bowl of the cavern. His legionaries could make the descent, but they would be completely exposed, and the orks were under cover.

Then horns sounded through the halls of the attack moon, their cries long, wailing and ugly. They repeated and echoed, overlapping with the urgency of their call. They shook the platform, and the orks in the galleries suddenly hesitated in their attack. After the first cycle of cries from the horns, most of the greenskins started moving again, but there was confusion in their ranks. Some resumed their rush towards the core. Others turned the other way, heading outwards. Only a few remained, too eager to kill the present enemy than obey the conflicting demands of challenge and klaxon.

‘Now is our chance!’ Kal’ma shouted. ‘Finish the beasts above the target zone.’

Nocturnean rockets slammed into the galleries, collapsing arches that were so crude, they might have been natural formations. The rubble blocked the orks’ paths in and out of the cavern. It crushed the greenskins directly over the site where the seismic charge would sit and created a mound of debris in which to conceal it.

Kal’ma led the run to the edge of the platform and leapt down, drawing the diminishing fire from the orks, racing to complete the mission before the enemy answered its new call.

Rhy’tan never hesitated as he fought. He and his brothers held their positions at the edge of the huge ruin. Through flame and shell they fired at the orks. Not once did Rhy’tan break from killing the greenskins. And yet, as Vulkan killed the warlord and turned to smite the lesser orks below, Rhy’tan felt as if his consciousness had been seized, detached from his body to bear witness to the overwhelming force of the primarch. He thought that the orks felt it too. Every aspect of the war in the hall that was not centred on Vulkan became thin, insignificant, a pantomime background to the true conflict, the main event. Vulkan’s presence filled the hall.

The shelling faltered, then stopped. Rhy’tan was surprised that the orks would lose their will to fight to that degree. Dimly, through the smoke, he saw cannons begin to withdraw.

‘They are retreating,’ said T’kell.

‘No,’ said Vulkan, his voice reverberating above the diminished clamour of the battle. ‘Orks do not surrender. They do not retreat unless forced to. This is something else.’

Vulkan leapt from the top of the wreckage and came down amid the orks

with the force of thunder, and the greenskins fell back before him. They quailed before the being who had slain their unstoppable leader, and the ripples of panic spread out around the primarch as orks scrambled away from the dark colossus. Then he cut two down with a stroke of *Nightforged* and burned a furrow through their ranks with *Anvil's Light*. Burned corpses toppled, their heads and upper torsos vaporised.

The orks screamed at Vulkan and charged back. He met their attack with one whose ferocity dwarfed theirs, and Rhy'tan almost laughed with exhilaration to see the orks outnumbered by a single warrior. The greenskins surrounded Vulkan, stabbing and shooting wildly. Vulkan marched into the tide and slew orks as if he were reaping grain. The horde could not slow him. The faster they attacked, the more quickly they gave themselves up to death.

'To the primarch!' Rhy'tan shouted. 'Into the fires of battle!'

'*Unto the anvil of war!*' his brothers answered, and they charged out of their shelter.

The orks had begun to ignore the legionaries, turning their attention instead to the greater threat in their midst. They paid for their mistake, gunned down by the dozen, and it was several seconds before enough of the aliens understood what they had turned their backs on to try to fight back. The mob fought with itself, trying to attack Vulkan and the legionaries at the same time, and failing at both.

The five legionaries made for Vulkan, intending to fight at his side, but they moved through the orks slowly. They fought as a unit, covering each other's flanks, Rhy'tan and T'kell at the fore, cutting down the brutes with bolter shells to the head. They marched over the corpses of the fallen, crunching bones beneath ceramite boots, surrounded by the stench of smoke and foul ork bodies. And though they advanced through the hall with purpose and without pause, they could not catch up with Vulkan.

The primarch tore through the space of the battlefield with a speed approaching a sprint. He ripped through the orks as though they were air. They swarmed up his frame, attempting to bring him down by any means, even the mindless application of sheer mass. At times, Vulkan disappeared from Rhy'tan's view, but he always reappeared moments later, hurling his attackers to the ground and gutting them with his blade.

Discordant horns began to sound. The orks howled with them, and their movements became confused, torn between the imperatives to answer the call and to kill Vulkan.

'*The companies are reporting in,*' Ber'han voxed. '*All seven seismic charges have been set. But the greenskins are heading towards the surface of the base. They are preparing to invade.*'

‘We must hold them, my sons,’ Vulkan declared without pausing in his slaughter of the orks. ‘A short while longer. Fight them with me. Kill them. Fill the horde with our presence and our challenge. I have sent word to the fleet. Make the orks tarry, and soon their defeat will be inevitable.’

Anvil’s Light blazed again, a star suddenly born in the gloom of the hall, and ork bodies disintegrated. Rhy’tan saw the flare of the plasma pistol as the light of an infallibility forged through the work of a cosmic furnace. Vulkan had achieved the perfection every warrior of Nocturne sought to embody and, by his example, inspired all to the ideals he made manifest. Rhy’tan threw himself into the battle with renewed energy and ferocious joy.

They were six against thousands. The primarch had already done the impossible. It would be a small matter to force the thousands to turn from the goal the subordinates of the great warlord demanded they perform, to turn their savage instincts his way, and slaughter them.

He followed in the footsteps of his primarch, and no enemy was too powerful, no odds were too great.

A greenskin crouched beneath Rhy’tan’s arc of fire lunged up and grabbed his helm with massive claws. It shrieked at him and hurled him into T’kell. Three more orks leapt in to take advantage. So’bak turned his flamer on the trio. The flames washed over Rhy’tan and T’kell, and Rhy’tan welcomed the rush of purifying fire. He and T’kell blasted the attackers to pulp, and then, the flames still streaming from their armour, they rushed even more fiercely into the horde. T’kell was laughing, and it took Rhy’tan a second to realise that he was too. It was the laughter of triumph.

The war had spread a graveyard of ships through the void stretching from the near orbit of Antaeum out towards the edge of the system, an attenuated comet tail of debris that would orbit Taras forever, a thousand broken monuments to the struggle for a world of death. There were wrecks that were relatively intact. The frigate *Dragonspine* had broken in half, its stern and bow drifting slowly apart, spreading frozen gas and tumbling corpses in their wake. When the ork ships died, most of them disintegrated, as if reality had suddenly awakened to the affront of these vessels and torn them into shreds.

Separated from the strength of the attack moon, the swarm of ork vessels was unable to overwhelm the ships of Nocturne. Large numbers of greenskin ships were still at anchor over Antaeum, still sending down their troops to the planet. Now, as the *Flamewrought* took the fleet in towards the ork base once more, some of the attacking ships broke away, racing ahead to the heart of the ork invasion.

On the bridge of the *Flamewrought*, the auspex operator noted their

departure. ‘Why make things easier for us?’ she asked.

An ork ram ship blew up under fire from the battleship’s broadsides. Its detonating mass careened forwards and collided with the *Flamewrought* on her starboard flank. The impact was close to the bow, but was strong enough to shake the bridge. Och’hi glanced at the damage report as it arrived on a pict screen next to his command throne. He had ordered the alarm klaxons silenced hours ago. The ship’s crew was more than aware of what was being done to the hull. *Easier*, he thought. *That is a matter of debate.*

‘They are increasing the pressure on us,’ he said to the bridge officers. ‘They are rushing to aid the mass descent from the attack moon. They represent the real danger.’

The *Flamewrought* drew closer to the ork base. It shuddered again as a hundred ork cannon shells hit simultaneously. The void shields managed to repulse the worst of the damage, but the arrival of each bombardment was eroding the leviathan’s defensive strength. The process was as gradual as waves crashing against rock, and as inexorable.

‘Launch bays,’ Och’hi voxed, ‘what is your status?’

‘*Standing by for your command*.’

Och’hi nodded to himself. The operation was delicate. The *Flamewrought* and its escorts were coming in an unnaturally tight formation. In the oculus, the strike cruiser *Drakelord* was nudging into view to port and starboard. If even one ship underwent a cataclysmic plasma explosion, its death would devastate the rest of the fleet. And the vessels were going to have so many launch bays open at the same time. The risk was enormous. With the destruction of the Termite, it was also necessary. The Legion was courting one disaster in order to avert a greater one.

The situation did not please Och’hi, but it did not surprise him.

‘Approaching target,’ the auspex officer called out.

‘Overlay,’ said Och’hi.

Diagrammatic runes appeared on the oculus. A bright red icon flashed over the *Klostzatz*’s crash site. The scar was bigger now, marked by the fresh burns where the ork ram ship had destroyed itself. The wound was profound too. The icon was centred over the shaft drilled into the attack moon by the *Spear of Fire*.

Och’hi spoke to the fleet. ‘Concentrate fire to the fore. Aim for the ships in low orbit and in proximity to the greenskin base. Direct the enemy’s attention to that threat.’ He did not think of the orks responding logically to his feint. Instead, he was leading a dangerous animal to the slaughter.

The huge barrage began. ‘Enemy responding,’ the auspex officer said a few moments later. ‘They are evading and moving towards an attack position

above the ecliptic.’

‘Track them. Keep them blinded with our fire.’ He paused, watching the icon flash, watching the coordinates next to it align. *Now*, he thought. ‘All ships, open bay doors. Gunships, launch, launch, launch!’

The tacticarium screens lit up with one green rune after another. Och’hi could not feel the effect of the launches, but he imagined he did, a distant, rhythmic, determined thrum in the hull, a hopeful one this time, a steady pulse as Thunderhawks streamed from the *Flamewrought* and the other large ships of the fleet. One hundred gunships left their berths. They would be easy prey for the orks as they crossed the void, but only if the enemy saw them. Next to the threats presented by the battleship and cruisers, they were insignificant.

They were small glints streaking through the dark. There was nothing they could do against a weapon like the attack moon. Except that they were also small enough to follow the path of the *Spear of Fire*. Under the camouflage of the barrage, while the great ships hurled themselves into the full rage of the insect swarm of the orks, some made for the hulks boarded by the other companies of the Legion, while the rest descended into the shaft bored into the attack moon by the Termite, racing to retrieve the hundreds of legionaries before the full immensity of the ork numbers fell on Antaeum.

The seven companies of Nocturne, having secured the death of the attack moon, charged back towards the shaft to ensure its death had meaning and would not be the hollow destruction of an empty abode. Vulkan had foreseen the possibility that the Termite would not make a return journey, and he had carefully planned the positions of the seismic charges relative to each other. The charges were directional, and while the companies had radiated out with Vulkan as the centre, they had also moved back up towards the surface. The distance was negligible with respect to the impact of the explosives, so close to the core of the base, but it was strategically vital. The companies could make their way back to the shaft, whether through passages or by forcing their way with demolition charges, faster than heading back to the Termite’s position, and if they were a few hundred metres closer to the surface they would gain valuable seconds as the Thunderhawks gathered them and reversed their course back up the shaft.

Sho’mar barrelled along the last stretch of the ragged corridor leading to the Termite’s shaft. He and his squad had followed the trail marked by the rest of the Sixth Company. He passed through a wall whose opening bore molten edges, the mark of a melta bomb used to defeat the barrier. The legionaries came to a stop on a ledge of splayed metal. A wind roared up the great shaft, the atmosphere of the attack moon rushing out into the void.

Sho’mar’s company had just finished boarding and the Thunderhawk *Hand of Fire* hovered close to the gap in the wall, its side door open. To Sho’mar’s right, he saw a stream of gunships, some descending the shaft, others heading back up. Enemy fire began about three-quarters of the way towards the top. The orks had noticed the presence of the Thunderhawks and were trying to bring them down. The gunships weaved, doing their best to evade, but they had little room to manoeuvre. There was barely space in the shaft for two to pass each other.

Ork rockets shot out from the side. They flew into the exhaust of a Thunderhawk’s starboard engine and exploded. The gunship went out of control and into the path of another that was accelerating towards the void. The two ships collided, and more ork rockets lanced out into the developing wreck. A fireball bloomed in the shaft, spreading out to all sides, driving other gunships into desperate evasions to prevent a chain reaction. The craft nearest to the collision flew above the wreck and sent Hellstrike missiles at the ork position. The blasts faded, and there was no more fire from that portion of the shaft.

The wreckage of the gunships tumbled down towards the centre of the attack moon, careening off the walls. There was a grace to the fall and a terrible kind of silence. From this distance, there was also the illusion of slow movement.

Sho’mar leapt into the *Hand of Fire*. The squad followed, and he slammed the side door shut. The pilot turned the Thunderhawk around, aiming its nose back up the shaft. Sho’mar watched through a viewing block as the ricocheting wreckage came closer, growing large, shedding grace and gaining vicious speed. It bounced back and forth across the shaft, the movements unpredictable.

The pilot gunned the Thunderhawk’s engines and aimed it up the middle of the tunnel. He had a clear run for space. There were no other gunships coming the other way. There was only the wreck.

Beside Sho’mar, Ru’than said, ‘Will fate be this capricious?’

‘I choose to think not,’ said Sho’mar.

Hand of Fire raced upwards. The wreckage came closer, a cascade of metal and flame. It smacked off the sides of the shaft again and passed across the path of the Thunderhawk. The gunship jerked upwards and clipped the edge of a spinning tail. The impact juddered through the hull. *Hand of Fire* veered to the side, one wing scraping against the walls, sparking flame. Then the wreckage was past, and the Thunderhawk flew on.

‘We will not bow to fate,’ Sho’mar said. ‘It may bloody us, but we will bring it to heel.’

The reports of the extraction's progress came to Vulkan over the vox. He threw himself into his final battle on the attack moon, making himself the threat the orks could not ignore. The more of the greenskin horde he kept here, the more he drew away from his troops and from the enemy's embarkation points. If he held the orks long enough, he would save the mission. If he saved the mission, he would save Antaeum. If he saved Antaeum, he would save the Taras System.

The orks swarmed around him, rushing to their annihilation. Their weapons were feeble mockeries compared to the warlord's hammer. They slashed at the damage in his armour. They drew blood, but every wound was a spur to greater fury. If the orks were a tide, then he broke it, he smashed it and taught it fear. The greenskins rushed him in their anger, and he took them apart.

Closer to the centre of the room, Rhy'tan and the others fought on. Vulkan could see the fire in their struggle. He knew it was more than personal loyalty to him that drove them. They had seen, they had heard and they had understood. *There*, Vulkan thought, *the alloy is forged.* With a determination born of hope, he killed the orks anew.

'Come to me!' he shouted at the greenskins. 'I have taken your leader! I am taking all of you to the grave! Come and stop me!'

Time, he thought. *Come and give me a bit more time.*

Now it seemed the orks declined his invitation. He unleashed another withering blast with the plasma pistol and after the flash, he saw that the horde had thinned. The orks nearest him had not given up, but further away they were streaming out of the hall. Some greater instinct or a greater call was summoning them. They were rushing to the prey that was Antaeum.

No more time, then.

'Nomus,' Vulkan called, 'we are done here. Now we must finish our task.'

In four strides, he cut through the shrinking army of greenskins and was halfway to the squad. The legionaries blasted their way to meet him, then they all turned for the entrance to the shaft. Ork fire followed them, a last attempt to punish the invaders.

Outside the hall, at the end of the shaft, the Thunderhawk *Eye of the Furnace* was hovering, its engines firing short bursts back to the left and right as it held its position. '*You are the last, lord primarch,*' the pilot, Ran'kon, voxed.

'Are the other ships clear of the attack moon?' Vulkan asked.

'*The last few are just exiting the tunnel.*'

Vulkan jumped up into the troop compartment. 'Then we shall not tarry.' When the last of his sons was aboard, he said, 'Let us go.'

As the Thunderhawk rose, he voxed Och'hi on the *Flamewrought*. 'Have the

orks launched?’ he asked.

‘*They are beginning to,*’ said Och’hi. ‘*The first ships have departed. I am seeing bays opening up across the greenskin base. Do you wish the Thunderhawks to engage?*’

‘No,’ said Vulkan. ‘Get them clear and recover them.’

Eye of the Furnace roared up the shaft. It travelled much faster than the Termite had descended, but the distance seemed much greater now as the seconds vanished and choices disappeared.

‘Send the warning to all ships,’ Vulkan told Och’hi. ‘Prepare for the destruction of the attack moon. This will be the only warning.’

Ork gunfire clanged against the sides of the Thunderhawk. A rocket flashed over the nose. Another came in a diagonal approach, missing its target but exploding as it grazed the top of the Thunderhawk. The ship bucked in the explosion but kept going.

Then they were through, pulling out, passing once more through the tomb that was the *Klostzatz*, the surface of the ork base pulling away so slowly, too slowly. Vulkan saw the hatches too, sudden craters opening like plague boils across the face of the attack moon. Ork drop-ships rose from them, blocky, improbable machines capable of perhaps a single flight. But that would be enough. That would be too much.

‘We kill the beast now,’ Vulkan declared. He blinked through the auto-senses of his helm and sent the detonation command. The signal travelled from his armour to the seismic charges.

Seconds passed. The bombs went off so deep inside it seemed, at first, that nothing had changed. Then agony wracked the attack moon’s form. Crevasses spider-webbed across the surface. The crust vibrated. A drop-ship climbed unsteadily from a tremor-gripped launch bay, slammed into the side, overturned and fell back in.

The shaking increased. The ork base trembled like a madman’s fist. Fire erupted from the fissures. Vulkan sensed the unheard groan convulsing the great monster. And then the leviathan exploded.

The planetoid became a meteor swarm. Huge chunks of debris smashed through the ork fleet, turning ships into gas.

The surface suddenly rose towards *Eye of the Furnace*, the attack moon grasping for the gunship in the instant of its death. As it rose, it parted. The crust became a storm of rubble. Fragments the size of frigates rushed for the Thunderhawk. Behind them came the expanding fireball of the base’s destruction.

The gunship jerked, and the pilot fought to manoeuvre away from the rocks. A vast piece soared past within metres of *Eye of the Furnace*. It came so close

Vulkan could see the tunnels bored into it like those of an anthill. Orks fell from the tunnels. Some still lived and clung to the edges, their mouths gaping in horror and shock.

For long moments, the Thunderhawk was inside the maelstrom of debris, in the depths of racing destruction. The pilot showed the skill that Vulkan had trained into his Legion and threaded the gunship through the catastrophe.

Then the meteors were past. *Eye of the Furnace* was clear, and it had outrun the fire. It flew on, heading for the fleet. The rippling of void shields showed the warships weathering the impacts of the dead attack moon, their guns blasting away the larger fragments of the planetoid. The ork fleet could not do the same. Its ships were too slow, too clumsy, too makeshift. They had come together around a monster, and now they died with it.

And below, the atmosphere of Antaeum burned with the fires of the rain of stones.

Numeon was firing from the top of the narrow peak into the orks that were swarming around the narrow base. He risked a moment to look up, the same moment that the orks shouted in confusion, and saw that the sky had turned red.

The clouds were on fire.

Saluran laughed. ‘The orks are coming in for a hard landing,’ he said.

The blaze turned the night into the interior of a furnace. And now, heated by re-entry, the burning, incandescent rubble of the greenskin base streaked to the ground. Smaller fragments landed on the lava plain. The earth shook under an orbital bombardment. Wherever a meteor struck, orks died.

Thunder had come to the surface of Antaeum, and it roared and roared without cease. Numeon still fired his bolter, but he had to grasp hold of the peak to keep from being shaken off.

Beyond the southern volcanic range, something big came down. Suddenly, it was as bright as day. A sun rose over the mountains, ugly and raging at its birth. The light blinded, then a pillar of fire kilometres wide bellowed up to the sky.

The legionaries crouched down, auto-senses slamming shut as the shock wave arrived. It flattened the army on the plain. But over the mountains, the fire climbed and spread, and the planet shook from yet more impacts. If there had been a civilisation on Antaeum, it would have died on this day. Perhaps if the orks had managed to spread their full numbers over the land, they would have withstood the storm. But they had not landed. Their greatest number had perished with the attack moon.

Numeon could see again. The mountains to the south had vanished in the

dust. The clouds burned and the rocks fell yet, but the sky was beginning to blacken once more. Another kind of night was gathering over all of Antaeum, a night that would not pass for centuries.

The volcanoes roared, shocked to life again by the hammer blows from the sky.

'*Artellus,*' a voice croaked on the vox. It was Vaughn. '*Is it true?*'

'It is, lord commander,' said Numeon. 'The greenskin base has fallen. The orks will have nothing left to the south. There is only the army of the plain, and it is badly hurt.'

'*Good. Good,*' said Vaughn, the words heavy with meaning and emotion.

There was a rumble to the north.

'The cone,' said Orasus. 'It's going to erupt again.'

'Lord commander,' Numeon began.

'*We know,*' said Vaughn. '*We cannot stay here. And the orks are at our door again. We will not let the planet do the work for us this time. One more charge, then. If this night is the end of it, the glory will be real.*'

There were new lights now descending from the sky. They came more slowly, more deliberately. They left the contrails of engines.

'Brothers,' Orasus said.

'It is not night,' Numeon told Vaughn. 'It is dawn.'

On the plain, the surviving orks screamed at the sky. The chieftain howled and shook its claw at the descending ships. Then it turned to the three legionaries and charged them, frothing in its desperate wrath to attack an enemy it could kill even when the skies themselves had turned on it. Its minions still numbered in the tens of thousands, but they were confused now, unsure where to turn.

Over the vox, Numeon heard the battle cries as the defenders of the Cauldron swept out of the gates to meet the enemy one last time. 'Come, brothers,' he said to Orasus and Saluran. 'Shall we see the end of this war?'

They opened fire on the chieftain. As it raced forwards, it too seemed to know that the end had come.

EIGHT

CLAW / FUSION / BAPTISM

A name is not simply a marker, a means of differentiating one thing from another. A name, a true name, is an essence. It must be chosen with care, because a name and the Legion it designates will become each other. It holds up the essence to the light. It reveals the nature of strength. The name, in another age, would be called the soul.

– Vulkan, *Ontology*

Eye of the Furnace soared over the lava plain, racing north towards the XVIII's stronghold. The heavy lifters were bringing in the Legion's tanks, and the drive to push the orks north had begun. Already, the new eruptions were trapping the orks. Between the advancing lava and heavy armour, the enemy was being confined to an ever narrower portion of the plain.

Kilometres before the lone volcano, where the remains of the Terran XVIII were striking out ahead of another eruption, Vulkan saw the orks swirling around a small column of rock. A single Thunderhawk circled the position, strafing the greenskins with heavy bolters, but he could see no immediate reason for the orks or the gunship to be focused on this location. He voxed Ran'kon and drew his attention to the anomaly. 'Take us closer,' he said.

Ran'kon obeyed, *Eye of the Furnace* closed in, and Vulkan saw three legionaries engaging the orks, fighting them with enough fury that they had slowed the aliens' advance towards the Cauldron. A huge chieftain with a massive power claw was upon them now. It was smaller than the monster that had commanded the attack moon, but it was large enough to overwhelm

legionaries already hard-pressed by greenskins on all sides.

'*Eye of the Furnace* will drop us here,' Vulkan voxed the pilots. 'It will remain to support the attacks of that Thunderhawk. All other gunships, proceed north and clear the path for your brothers leaving the stronghold. Help them get ahead of the lava so they can finally deliver long-awaited judgement upon the foe.'

As Vulkan pulled open the side door, Rhy'tan stepped up beside him. Vulkan looked at the Igniax. 'How fare your doubts?' he asked.

'There are none, lord primarch.'

'You no longer think the Terrans are doomed to extinction.'

Rhy'tan shook his head. 'It shames me that I ever thought so about my brothers.'

'I suspect they also shared your opinion,' Vulkan said.

There was no fatalism in the battle he saw below. As they struggled against the giant, they fought with a fire that would leave no room for despair.

'They believe they can win,' Vulkan said. 'Let us prove them right.'

Six metres above the struggle, he jumped.

The huge chieftain shrugged off the bolt shells. They punched uselessly into the monster's armour, the shots that did get through to flesh failing to even slow the ork. It aimed its massive gun at Numeon. He jumped out of the way just before it fired, and the shell smacked into a greenskin coming up behind him with the force of a grenade.

As a Thunderhawk arrived overhead, Saluran came at the chieftain from the side, melta bomb in hand. The monster whirled on him and snapped its power claw down over his left shoulder. The crushing vice snapped through Saluran's armour. His arm went limp and he dropped the bomb. The ork lifted him high and smashed him to the ground. It released him and he lay still, a broken figure on the rocky plain. It lifted the claw again, the jaws closed ready to impale the legionary.

A cluster of orks surrounded Orasus, forcing him to fight them, blocking him from reaching his fallen brother. Numeon charged at the chieftain, firing continuously, but the beast ignored him.

Then a demi-god dropped from the sky.

The warrior hit the ground, and his sudden presence had the power of an orbital bombardment. Massive as he was, he was smaller than the ork chieftain, but the force of his being made him seem taller. The ork paused, uncertain. The others stumbled back, thrown by their leader's hesitation and even more disturbed by the new arrival's aura of implacable majesty. It was as if the stones of the planet themselves had declared war on the greenskins and

had taken on the form of this unforgiving warrior.

For Numeon, the second of Vulkan's arrival seared itself forever into his consciousness. Though the pause in the struggle was momentary, the moment would, in his memory, stretch to eternity, the war frozen forever. He stared at Vulkan, overcome with the awe and gratitude of one knelt before a revealed truth.

Other legionaries dropped from the gunship. They opened fire on the orks, and two made their way towards Orasus and Numeon. As they drew near, Numeon saw the markings on their pauldrons. He made out the names *Rhy'tan* and *T'kell*. They wore mantles of a thick animal scale, but it was the Legion number on their left pauldrons that astonished him.

XVIII.

They cut down the press of orks around Orasus, and the four legionaries formed up on instinct, shoulder to shoulder. The impossibility of what Numeon was witnessing fell away before the rightness of the action. He could not understand how these were his brother legionaries, yet somehow he knew, with the certainty of the stone beneath his feet, that they were.

As they slew the orks in a widening circle, Vulkan lunged at the chieftain. The ork was much larger than the primarch, but it seemed diminished before him. When Vulkan struck, it was as if rock and fire had taken human form, and the blow staggered the ork. The chieftain roared, but its bellow sounded defensive.

It raised its gun to fire, but Vulkan was faster with his plasma pistol. The blinding fireball enveloped the ork's weapon. The gun exploded, taking the ork's hand with it, leaving the chieftain with a jagged stump dripping melted flesh. Then, with a flash of dark light, Vulkan's blade sliced through the ork's armour at its left shoulder. The plates parted with a hiss, and so did flesh, muscle and bone.

The ork's arm fell to the ground.

The bane of Lord Commander Cassian Vaughn stood motionless before Vulkan. Its weapons gone with its limbs, it was nothing now except a mountain of impotent rage. It screamed at Vulkan and stumbled towards him, still in denial.

Vulkan cut the ork's power claw off the severed arm and sheathed his sword. He picked up the claw and plunged its open jaws into the greenskin's chest. With the beast impaled, he fired the plasma pistol into its face. There was a solemn anger to his actions. He was not killing with contempt: this was judgement, a sentence carried out for the crimes that had been committed.

The carcass of the ork chieftain collapsed and with its fall, every witness present, human and ork, knew that the war was over. Except it was not. The

final steps of its terrible dance still had to be carried out.

Numeon's instinct was to bend the knee to his primarch. He did not even have to think, for that was surely who Vulkan was. Numeon knew this rationally, instinctively, with every cell of his being. He knew this was his father and the father of every battle-brother of the XVIII Legion.

But there was a war to finish, so the primarch turned from the body of his fallen enemy and fell upon the orks. Numeon did too, fighting with the ferocity of resurrected hope.

With Rhy'tan and T'kell, Numeon and Orasus blasted through the orks and reached Saluran where he lay. They were joined by still more legionaries who had dropped from the Thunderhawk after Vulkan. They and Orasus set up a ring of bolter fire that kept the greenskins back while Numeon knelt over Saluran. A glance told him everything. Saluran's torso was destroyed. His bones were shattered, and his hearts and lungs, pierced and failing, were exposed to the air. He gurgled something, and Orasus removed his helm. Saluran's face was slack and grey, but his eyes burned. He gazed past Numeon to where Vulkan brought destruction to the orks. His lips twitched and he whispered, 'I see him.'

'You held the ground, and our primarch is here,' Numeon told him.

Rhy'tan crouched on the other side of Saluran. 'You have triumphed,' he said. 'You will be remembered, brother.'

'Brother,' Saluran repeated. Then he died, his eyes shining with thanks.

In the corner of his eye, Vulkan saw the legionaries rise from their dead brother and exact vengeance on the orks. Above, the two Thunderhawks pounded the xenos with their dorsal cannons, heavy bolters and missiles. They burned huge furrows in the orks, the explosions of their ordnance like a chain reaction of volcanic eruptions.

The chieftain was dead, the skies raged on the orks and at last they knew despair. The greenskins fell back before Vulkan, faster and faster, and then they fled. They retreated in disarray, racing north towards the Cauldron. Perhaps, in the depths of their brutish instincts, a glimmer of pride pushed them to try to destroy the Terran XVIII in a final act of defiance.

If this was the impulse that drove them, it was an illusion and it did not last long.

Vulkan pursued the greenskins. Rhy'tan, T'kell and the rest of his escort charged in his wake with Numeon and Orasus. Behind them, the heavy armour roared in, speeding across the plain, flattening the remains of a routed army. In the middle distance to the north, the flights of gunships laid waste to the horde. Vulkan had commanded them to assist the advance of the Terran

XVIII, but as he raced north, closing in on the glow of the eruption, he saw that the besieged warriors had already received what they needed. The Cauldron itself was destroyed, a flaming glow on the mountainside, exploding ammunition silhouetting the lava-swept ruins. The legionaries had stormed out with such force that they had done more than punch through the orks at the base of the volcano.

They had set them to flight.

The Legion of Terra and the Legion of Nocturne converged, crushing the orks between them. As he drew closer to the sons he had nearly lost, Vulkan saw the fury with which they were attacking. After more than a year of being eroded to the marrow by the orks, the return of hope had filled them with justified fury, and the demoralised greenskins could not withstand the hurricane of rage that descended upon them from the erupting volcano.

The end came quickly. Abandoning themselves to panic and flight, their army already reduced to a mere vestige of the swarm it had once been, the orks turned west. Beyond the lava fields, the land descended to the bed of a long-vanished ocean. On an endless plain of petrified coral, with no shelter for thousands of kilometres, shell and flame pursued the orks to their final end.

When the last of the greenskins was a smouldering corpse, the warriors of Terra and Nocturne regarded each other, and Vulkan saw the alloy he needed had been forged on the fields of Antaeum. Brother had encountered brother and known that they were no longer lost to each other.

Numeon and Orasus had kept to within a few metres of Vulkan during the entire rout. Now they dropped to their knees before him. The entirety of the Terran XVIII did the same.

‘No,’ Vulkan said. ‘Rise, my sons. I am your father, not your king. We do not kneel in fealty.’

They looked up at him and, after a hesitation, got to their feet again.

Vulkan was not finished. ‘Kneeling is an act of respect. It is a tribute that must be earned. And you have earned it.’

He knelt, and the Legion in its entirety murmured in awe.

‘Your sacrifices to save the people of the Taras Division will be remembered forever. You performed what was impossible and made the sacrifice without hesitation, knowing your task doomed you, and that it was thankless. But I give you my thanks now.’ He bowed his head.

After a long moment, he rose and walked through the silent, attentive ranks to a Thunderhawk that had landed in the last minutes of the fight. An Apothecary had transported a medicae bed down the ramp, and Vulkan approached the warrior who lay on it.

Vaughn was close to the end, but triumph lit his drawn face.

‘Primarch…’ Vaughn rasped.

Vulkan knelt beside the lord commander. He detached the ork claw from his belt and presented it to Vaughn. ‘Your enemy is dead,’ he said. ‘His weapon is now your own.’

‘I would still serve…’ said Vaughn.

‘And you will,’ Vulkan told him, standing again. ‘I will see you rise again, Cassian Vaughn, your strength the equal of your will.’

He turned to the combined Legion. ‘This warrior has fought to the edge of certain doom. So have all who followed him. But we have defeated doom, and so we shall again.

‘Behold the Eighteenth Legion!’ he announced, his voice thundering across the dead ocean. He spoke to himself as much as to his sons. The truth of their nature rushed over him. *Did you know, Father?* he wondered. *Did you know this moment would come? Is that why you bade me wait? So that I too would see and understand?*

Vulkan pointed back to the east, where the eruptions and lava flows turned the horizon red. ‘Behold the furnace! Behold the anvil of war! Behold the flames of rebirth! Hear me, my sons! Hear your name! You are the fire-born!

‘*YOU ARE THE SALAMANDERS!*’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Annandale is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Ruinstorm* and *The Damnation of Pythos*, and the Primarchs novels *Roboute Guilliman: Lord of Ultramar* and *Vulkan: Lord of Drakes*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written *Warlord: Fury of the God-Machine*, the Yarrick series, several stories involving the Grey Knights, including *Warden of the Blade* and *Castellan*, as well as titles for The Beast Arises and the Space Marine Battles series. For Warhammer Age of Sigmar he has written *Neferata: Mortarch of Blood*. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

An extract from *Jaghatai Khan Warhawk of Chogoris*.

The door shivered, its onyx panels already cracked and its carved jambs cracking. A storm blew through it, a roar of gold and white, as elemental as the summer gales on the Altak. A window pane shattered, sending teardrops of glass bouncing.

Courtiers scattered, hitching up heavy brocade robes and tottering like birds. A woman screamed, while a man stumbled and scrabbled on all fours towards the stairwell.

The storm paid them no heed. He strode through the crowd, eyes bright with a vital anger, towering over even the greatest and making them appear insignificant. In his wake came two armoured giants, clad in ivory and jasper, their heavy tread resounding on hard floors. All three titans glittered under the wheeling light of disturbed suspensors that set their scabbards and blade-pommels flashing.

‘His neck,’ said the Khagan of Chogoris, the Great Khan of the Fifth Legion Astartes, his long black hair flying loose. ‘If He does not learn to bend it, one day it will break.’

The primarch swept through the antechambers of the Imperial Palace, his cloak hem snapping like a whip about his heels. With him came the twin masters of his young army, Hasik and Giyahun, their bronze faces impassive.

Gold pillars soared up around them, chased and fluted and spiralled, inlaid with glass and studded with pearls. Marble statuary stood in blank isolation amid the mirrors and the porcelain, barred by the warm light of the Terran dawn.

A man in the robes of the Senatorum Imperialis emerged at the far end of the long gallery, took one look at the rampaging primarch, then darted out again. Other courtiers shrank back, bowing and stammering.

‘The mind – unequalled,’ the Khan growled, swinging into another hall. His closed fist punched out at a bulbous vase, and it shattered into a rain of echoing fragments. ‘But the neck. That is the weakness. That is the flaw.’

High windows passed by, leaded and mullioned, each offering glimpses of the immensity beyond – parapets rearing above parapets, glare-white from the

mountain air. The Palace was a never-ending project, they said, a billion techwrights working on it daily to render the peaks into cathedrals of the mind and the soul, raising up monuments to Unity that would endure for eternity. No guns marred the ramparts in those days, only pennants and propaganda, for war had left Terran skies a lifetime ago and now burned its way across the vaults of a deeper heaven.

'He gazes on the infinite,' the Khan spat, 'but we are body, blood and bone.'

His retinue made no reply. They did not as much as glance at the finery around them; their eyes were fixed forwards, their sun-darkened faces held rigid. Both carried a long scar on their cheeks, zigzagged in ritual imitation of lightning, the kindler-destroyer of the borderless grass. Both understood that they were not being addressed. This was their master in his anger, unleashing the torrent as a mountain unleashes its storms.

'Scorn not your tools, say the sages,' the Khan said. 'Scorn not the blade that cuts, lest it open your own veins.'

Another hall beckoned, another chamber within that cavernous interior, just as ornate, just as immaculate. Jewelled incense-drones swerved out of the primarch's path, whining as their grav-plates struggled to gain loft.

The Khan halted at last. More than thirty figures barred the way ahead. Some were armoured as he was, arrayed in a variety of Crusade-pattern war-plate. Others wore the uniforms of the Imperial Army – stiff jerkins, high collars, flak-weave half cloaks. A scattering of them were wrapped in the long robes of officials.

Jaghatai Khan glared at them hungrily, as if poised to attack. His great fist, locked within an ivory gauntlet, flexed instinctively. The delegation shrank back; it was never easy to look a primarch in the eye, no matter one's rank or training, and it was almost impossible to face an angry one.

'Who dares this now?' the Khan demanded.

Most did not speak. Some looked as if they had lost the capacity. Only one managed to return that gaze, and did so uneasily, as if he feared attracting the storm's full wrath.

'May it please you, lord,' he started, 'the ship is ready.'

The man was heavily built, old but not decrepit. His skin was lined, his muscle tone rigid, and he wore the dress uniform of an admiral in the Naval high command. In ordinary circumstances, he would have been a man of substance, one from whom many would take an order without question. Perhaps he had commanded many starships, and seen many worlds wreathed in the coronas of battle. Yet right then, just then, as he looked up into the face of one of the Emperor's sons, he might as well have been a youth of sixteen on his first assignment.

The Khan rounded on him. ‘What ship?’

‘The one ordained for you.’

‘Without my knowledge.’ The Khan shot a sour smile at Hasik. ‘It’d better be a good one.’

The admiral swallowed. ‘The best, lord. The very best. A Gloriana.’

‘Those words mean nothing to me.’

‘Perhaps, then…’ The admiral’s eyes fell away. ‘Perhaps it would be better to see it, then.’

As soon as the words left his lips, he went white. He took an involuntary step backwards, flinching as if in anticipation of a blow.

The Khan stared at him. The air seemed to fizz a little, as if energy were coiling somewhere. The light around them thickened, and the ivory gauntlet clenched into a fist.

Then the primarch laughed. He looked over at Giyahun, who grinned back.

‘He thinks I’ll skin him alive,’ the Khan said, speaking to his gene-son in Khorchin, the kin-speech of the Talskar of Chogoris.

‘Give the order, Khagan. My knife grows blunt in this shit shed.’

‘Ha. We’re guests, and my Father objects to blood on his fine floors.’ The Khan looked back at the admiral. ‘I was told I had an army,’ he said, reverting back to thickly accented Gothic.

Another official stepped forwards then, a portly woman with a severe bob and jowly cheeks. ‘Ready for inspection, lord.’

‘I was told I had counsellors.’

A third shuffled into view, a thin man with an augmetic jawline and receding hair. ‘Whenever you wish to consult us, lord.’

Hasik raised an eyebrow. ‘Never been given an army before,’ he said in Khorchin. ‘Always had to take them.’

The Khan shot him a dry look. ‘No man gives a gift without expecting another in return. We didn’t come here with our hands full.’

‘As they never cease to make clear.’

The primarch turned back to the first speaker. ‘Where is it, then?’ he asked. For all his imposing demeanour, there was something in that question – an eagerness, only part suppressed by awareness of rank, as if he had been shown some ancient blade only offered to the sons of princes.

‘Void-dock above Luna, lord,’ the admiral replied. ‘Ready for examination whenever you deem fit.’

The Khan scrutinised him a little longer. ‘Who sent you here? Malcador? My Father? You know I come from Him now? You know what we talked of?’ He waved the stuttering answer away. ‘No matter. Take me there – I need to fill my lungs with purer air.’ He glanced back at Hasik. ‘You, go and see this

army. See if it'll fight, or if it's as slack-gutted as everything else in this place.'

He gestured for Giyahun to follow him, then paused.

'Where's Yesugei?' he asked.

'Exploring,' ventured Giyahun, shrugging.

The Khan looked amused. 'One day that'll get him into trouble.' He summoned the admiral with a snap of his fingers. 'Come. Show me this ship you're so proud of. It had better be worth the journey.'

He stood in the chamber, chin raised, looking through the slender window. On the far side of the glass, a bird hopped across the stone sill. He watched it silently. The bird's head turned, angling a jewelled eye towards him. For a moment, they stared at one another.

Then a door creaked, tripping an announcement chime, and the creature fluttered away in a snap of feathers.

He watched it go, before turning to see who had entered.

A woman stood in the doorway. She was tall, her face angular. She wore deep green robes and bore the stylised I-icon of the Imperium atop a long metal staff.

'My apologies,' she said. 'Am I disturbing you?'

He bowed. 'Not at all.' He beckoned her in. 'Come.'

Only when she stepped under the light of the lumens was it apparent how tall she was. Most humans looked like children beside one of the Legiones Astartes, but she didn't. Perhaps that was due to her physical presence; perhaps something else.

'I was told you'd found your way here,' she said, looking around the chamber. 'Not many come this far up.'

The walls around them were decayed, a mottled stone that had aged and rotted. Packing crates lay about the floor, most filled with old machinery. A defunct cogitator stood in the shadows, its data-maw empty and gaping. The window looked out over far newer reaches of the Palace, all coronets of gold and silver, sharp-edged against the eye-watering dazzle from the mountains.

'Old, this place,' he said, smiling apologetically. 'Like me. Too old, they said.'

The woman leaned against the wall opposite him. 'For induction into the Legions? It depends. Sometimes the seed takes, sometimes it doesn't. Your Legion took a surprising number of post-adolescents. I wonder why?'

'Forgive,' he said, clasping his hands together in gesture of politeness. 'Who are you?'

'Magister Niasta. The office of the Sigillite. I was asked to make myself known to you. That proved harder than anticipated – you don't stick to your

itineraries. None of you do.’

He bowed. ‘Is true. I am–’

‘I know who you are.’ She looked at him carefully, a half-smile playing on her lips. ‘Tell me if I pronounce it right – zadyin arga, Targutai Yesugei.’

‘Excellent. You speak Khorchin. If we may?’

‘Afraid not. I know those two words, nothing else. They tell me it’s damned hard to learn.’

Yesugei gave a rueful smile. ‘And other way round. Will take time.’

‘The lexicographers will have the syntax decoded in a month. Then at least we’ll be able to use transcoder beads. Until then, it’s fumbling and stumbling.’

‘Fumbling and stumbling,’ Yesugei repeated, liking the sound of the words. ‘Yes, all of us.’

‘The rest, maybe. You, not so much.’ She ran her finger absent-mindedly up the length of the staff, right under the iron symbol of Malcador’s office. ‘You have an interesting mind, Targutai Yesugei. I sensed it when your delegation arrived, and now I’m standing close to you, I feel it more strongly. You know what I mean, I think.’

He smiled. Like all his kin, when he smiled his whole face creased. ‘Weather-magic,’ he said. ‘They told us it causes trouble.’

‘Weather-magic? How quaint. I’ve seen reports of what you can do with it. I think you’d better come up with a better name.’

‘Suits us.’

‘But it’s dangerous, this business.’ She looked at him more seriously. ‘That’s why we brought you here. Well, it’s one of many reasons, but an important one. You don’t hide it. You don’t seem to feel the need. I could admire that, but you’ll need to learn to.’

Yesugei looked at her quizzically.

‘Your master is the fifteenth primarch to be located,’ Niasta said. ‘His brothers were all brought here, just as he has been, and inducted into the ways of the Crusade. I saw them all come, one by one, ushered into the Palace and cloistered with the Emperor. Then I saw them go again, out into the void, where they now forge the Imperium at the head of the mightiest armies ever created. Each one of them would be a monarch on his own if allowed to be, an emperor greater than any that’s gone before, and yet they fight not for themselves, but for a greater vision. His vision.’

Yesugei nodded. ‘Is understood.’

‘Then you understand the danger. It is Unity. It is conformity. It has inherent vice. They must learn, all of them, and they must trust. So many of them find that difficult. How could they not? Even I struggle with it, and I’m not

tempted by your outrageous martial prowess.’

‘This, also, is understood.’

Niasta laughed. ‘So you know what’s coming. The Khan has spoken with his Father often since we brought you to Terra, and we know it’s not gone well. This is not uncommon, but we need it to go better.’

Yesugei sighed, and looked out of the window again. ‘Tell him, then. I am not master – he is.’

‘This is our message – there are no gods, there is no magic, there is only reason. This is our only weapon, the one sanctioned by Him, beloved of all, who set this thing in motion.’

‘Is nonsense.’

Niasta smiled tolerantly. ‘Which is, I gather, exactly what the Khan told the Emperor. And that’s what’s giving my master considerable trouble, and when our respective masters are at loggerheads, it falls to us to smooth things over.’

‘Logger heads?’

‘You know precisely what I mean.’

Yesugei smiled sadly, knowingly. ‘You wish us to lie.’

‘We wish you to be sensible.’

‘He will never lie.’ Yesugei lost his smile. ‘He has fault. All men have fault. But not this. He make an oath, the oath is kept. You understand?’

‘This is not about truth,’ Niasta said, just a trace of exasperation creeping into her polished voice. ‘It doesn’t need to be.’

Yesugei pursed his cracked lips. The ritual tattoos flexed as his skin moved, forming new and esoteric shapes across sun-toughened flesh. ‘We are warriors. We have weapon, we use it. Does not master us, we master it. That is balance.’

‘He needs to meet the Sigillite,’ Niasta said. ‘He needs to meet Malcador.’

Yesugei shrugged. ‘May not be possible.’

‘Make it possible.’

He turned to face her, looking at her carefully for the first time. ‘Your eyes,’ he said. ‘What happened?’

Niasta looked away. ‘Soul-binding,’ she said. ‘Most lose them.’

‘Soul-binding,’ Yesugei mused, softly. ‘So there are souls, then.’

‘Do not be obtuse.’

‘Be honest, with me. You have sight, both kinds. What is inner sense used for?’

‘I am not used. I serve.’

‘Now, yes. The future – who knows?’ He drew closer, and his golden eyes reflected the light from the window. ‘What you sense in me, Niasta, I sense in you. But be careful. We do not lie, even to ourselves. Perhaps you do.’

‘Get him to meet Malcador. That’s all I need.’

Yesugei hesitated, as if he wanted to say more. Then he thought better of it and turned away, back to the window.

‘I do what I can,’ he said.

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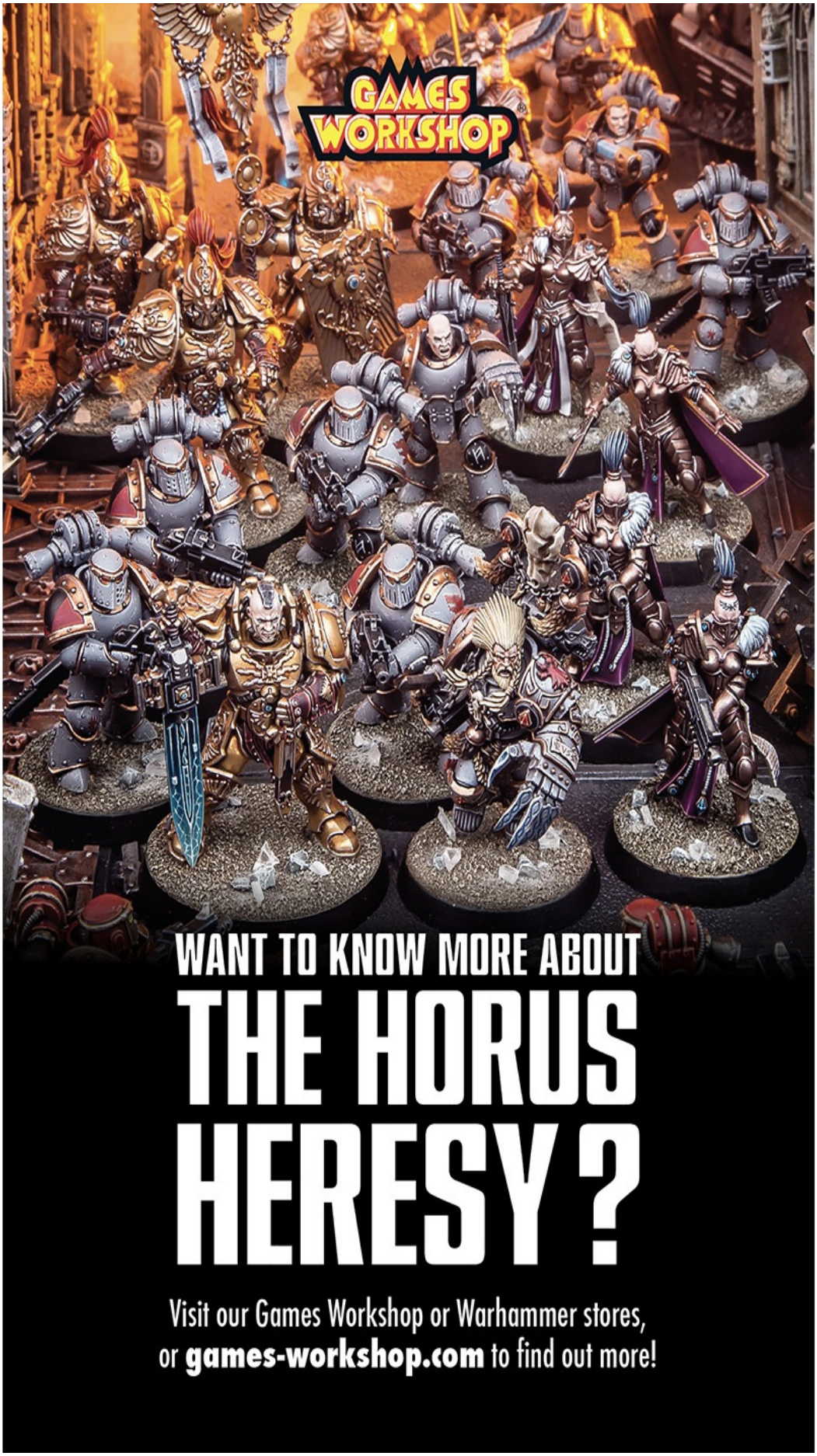
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A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

First published in Great Britain in 2018.
This eBook edition published in 2018 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.
Cover illustration by Mikhail Savier.

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ISBN: 978-1-78030-907-1

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